

# Metaphors of Career Success: The Case of Middle Managers

Jacqueline Dahan  
Université de Sherbrooke

## Abstract

This article aims to help career practitioners and counselors better understand the career success of their middle manager clients. The results presented emerge from an exploratory study of the success of middle managers working in the Québec aeronautics industry. Although admittedly not exhaustive, these results form a repertoire of four spatial metaphors that correspond to different views of career success held by middle managers interviewed. The metaphors rest on archetypal vehicles that illustrate the movement and speed of the career path, and the speed at which career success is built. The metaphors used by middle managers depict their chosen positioning relative to that endorsed by the organization. The repertoire can guide middle managers' professional and personal development and help them reflect on their designed positioning relative to the metaphor promoted by the organization.

## Résumé

L'article a l'objectif d'alimenter la compréhension des conseillers d'orientation sur le succès en carrière des cadres intermédiaires qui peuvent faire partie de leur clientèle. Les résultats présentés sont issus d'une étude exploratoire sur le succès des

cadres intermédiaires travaillant dans l'industrie aéronautique du Québec. Sans prétendre à l'exhaustivité, ces résultats composent un répertoire de quatre (4) métaphores spatiales rendant compte de différentes représentations du succès en carrière endossées par les cadres intermédiaires interviewés. Les métaphores mettent à profit des véhicules typés qui renseignent sur le mouvement de la trajectoire de carrière, sur la rapidité de celle-ci et sur celle de la construction du succès en carrière. Les métaphores endossées par les cadres intermédiaires sont informatives du positionnement qu'ils choisissent eu égard à celle promue par l'organisation. Le répertoire peut aider le cadre intermédiaire dans son exploration professionnelle et personnelle et dans sa réflexion quant au positionnement qu'il souhaite prendre face à la métaphore organisationnelle.

In recent years, structural changes have redefined the career and career success. Specifically, individuals have become more autonomous in this respect, are assuming greater responsibility for their career success, and are even taking on the role of "life entrepreneur" (Guichard, 2008, p. 431). This process is exemplified in the "life designing" model (Savickas et al., 2009, p. 239), which implies that the role of ca-

reer counsellor is fundamental because the profession consists of helping individuals "question the direction of their personal path and 'create themselves'" (translation of Cohen-Scali & Guichard, 2008, p. 3).

The results of this exploratory study can be useful for career practitioners and counselors who want to better understand the career success of their middle manager clientele. It presents the findings of an exploratory study of the career success of middle managers working in the Québec aeronautics industry. Although admittedly not exhaustive, these results form a repertoire of four spatial metaphors that correspond to different views of career success held by middle managers interviewed.

## The Metaphors

In their most rudimentary form, which dates back to Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian, metaphors are limited to a poetic role, i.e. embellishing language, and a rhetorical role, i.e. persuasion (Oliveira, 2009, p. 19). A more recent understanding emerging from cognitive science states that the "metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action [...] metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in lan-



guage but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). “Metaphors structure how we perceive, how we think and what we do” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 3); they orient our subsequent experiences and the way we invest in them. Metaphors are useful to understand careers; their epistemological value has been recognized for years (Inkson, 2006; Mignot, 2004; Oliveira, 2009; Smith-Ruig, 2008), as has their praxeological value (Mortlock & Parkin, 2004). For example, Amundson’s (2008) work *Metaphor Making: Your Career, Your Life, Your Way* discusses the richness and value of metaphors for career counselling and professional and personal exploration. Amundson assert that individuals conceptualize, continuously edit and re-edit their life story, using metaphorical language.

Researchers that explore career and career success have also employed metaphors. Some are well established and legitimized in the literature to account for the complexity of these concepts. For instance, spatial metaphors are often linked to a journey, while other metaphors refer to sports/competition (El-Sawad, 2005). Spatial metaphors convey vertical mobility, hierarchical ascent illustrated by a staircase or pyramid (Barley, 1989; Gunz, 1989). This mobility occurs along a trajectory or path, two spatial metaphors related to the Latin etymology of the word career, “carraria,” which means road or carriage (Arthur &

Lawrence, 1984, p. 1). Used by a carriage, paths (Herriot, 1992) are sometimes associated with a journey along which the career is realized (Nicholson & West, 1989) and success develops. In everyday speech, the metaphors of staircase or the key to success are often used in reference to careers and career success. These two concepts are closely interrelated in the mental schema of society, although researchers contend that they are not exact synonyms. Staircases depict a classic ascending path in an organization. They show that traditional career success entails a gradual hierarchical rise, with a series of promotions (steps on the staircase). The staircase metaphorically translates conformity because it is up to individuals to climb the staircase that the organization offers. If they achieve this, career success follows. This metaphor is similar to military metaphors of discipline in the works of El-Sawad (2005), which translate the importance of the soldier’s demonstrating obedience and conformity (Janowitz, 1968).

In contrast, metaphors related to competition or sports such as racing (Michaud, 2003) connote the Greek roots of the word career. In ancient Greece, career signified a race or tournament where the participants competed and one eventually won (Van Maanen, 1977). The expression “fast track” (Gowler & Legge, 1989) reflects this idea of a competitive tournament (El-Sawad 2005, p. 27). Michaud (2003) used the sports metaphor to describe the career success of high potential executives. She

emphasized the speed of obtaining promotions because it is not sufficient to simply be promoted; the rise should be as fast as possible. The scarcity of promotions available creates a process of competition/comparison between individuals. The race metaphorically explains that career success rests on the idea of exceeding expectations, going above and beyond and outperforming one’s peers. According to the prevailing organizational criteria, when the comparison is positive (i.e., the individuals successfully best or outpace their colleagues), they stand out favorably from the group and enjoy career success.

In recent years, other metaphors, such as that of “boundaryless career” and “protean career” (Briscoe et al., 2012), have surfaced to capture the impact of structural change on career paths. The protean metaphor refers to the Greek and Latin God Proteus, who could reconfigure according to the environment. Like Proteus, the individual’s career can change form, that is transform based on job opportunities that arise. Individuals thus determine the design of their career path. In contrast, the “boundaryless career” is a spatial metaphor similar to that of the often mentioned journey (Inkson, 2006, p. 56). The individual/traveler, also called a nomad (Tremblay, 2003) transcends territorial boundaries and takes a different path from the traditional linear one dictated by the organization. The individual/traveler typically makes several choices that determine how the professional journey will unfold (Inkson, 2006, p. 56). Riverin-Simard



(1984; 1998) also uses the journey metaphor, and argues that it is divided among what he calls three planets which correspond to three different universes: Studies, Work and Retirement. This journey would even be a “waltz in three-quarter time” among these universes, in which equilibrium should be maintained (Limoges, 2007, p. 248). This raises the concept of adaptation, which may lead to self-reinvention, rendered metaphorically by the adjective protean. Similarly, the metaphor of key to success highlights organizational pressure to conform: a key opens a lock only if it fits the mechanism exactly. The concept of fit or match translates the same fundamental idea. The metaphor of key to success does not mean that the lock cylinder must automatically be identical between organizations. Even though the career literature refers to the classic ascending trajectory as standard/generic, that is having fixed characteristics regardless of the organization and context, the metaphorical adjective protean clearly implies that the career and success built is a form of “action” rather than a “generic structure” (Inkson, 2006, p. 56). The paragraphs below describe the research methodology used to examine career success metaphors.

**Methodology**

To protect the identity of the participants, the two companies of comparable size that participated in the study were given fictitious names: InnoTech and HighTeam. These companies both operate in aeronautics in

Quebec. The Quebec industry represents nearly the entire Canadian aerospace industry. On the international scale, the Quebec aeronautics industry ranks fourth in terms of annual production value, after the United States, France and Great Britain (ISQ, 2009), and is well ahead of the other G7 countries. With over 40,000 employees and sales of nearly US\$12 billion, Quebec, in particular the Montréal region, offers more than one job in aeronautics per 200 inhabitants, equal to the second highest concentration in the world (MDEIE, 2006).

Quebec aeronautics companies have traditionally used one of two generic strategies to boost their competitiveness: 1) differentiation by innovation and 2) domination by operational efficiency.

All respondents in this exploratory study were middle managers between ages 35 and 40. They had accumulated on average 10 years of seniority at the company. Thirty-seven semi-structured interviews of approximately 90 minutes each were conducted between September 2004 and April 2005. First, a list of 25 candidates with various levels of responsibility, representing diverse departments of the company and with potential varying from poor to high, was produced for each participating

company. The executives from each organization helped the researcher by providing her with a large list of potential respondents. Secondly, individual formal invitations to participate in the study were sent directly to each candidate by the researcher. Thus, each individual contacted could feel totally free to participate in the study or not. Seventy-four percent of the candidates accepted the invitation. Eighteen interviews (13 men and 5 women) were conducted at the first company (InnoTech) and nineteen (15 men and 4 women) were conducted at the second company (HighTeam). In addition, a limited number of senior managers were interviewed at the two participating companies (Table 1) to clarify the particular features of the organizational context and the way top managers define individual career success. Data gathered in interviews were supplemented by analysis of information posted on the company website and of some corporate documents.

The four metaphors were conceptualized after themes from the participant interviews were clustered. The data were analyzed with NVivo using a comparison process that began with initial coding of the interview transcriptions according to the following themes: the meaning of

Table 1.  
Distribution of Interviews conducted at Each Company

	Interviews conducted	
	InnoTech (strategy of differentiation by innovation)	HighTeam (strategy of domination by operating cost efficiency)
Middle managers	18	19
Top managers	2	4
Total	20	23



career success, the view of career success promoted by the organization and the participants' understanding of the strategic context of their organization. The interview transcriptions were subsequently analyzed many times in alternation. The systematic, structured comparison process brought to light similarities and differences between the transcriptions, and served to identify other themes for the subsequent phases of coding. Lastly, it led to the identification of five dimensions (clustering themes) that structured the metaphors of success.

**Results- Metaphors of Career Success**

Referring to several types of vehicles, the four metaphors described above express the movement and speed of the career path, and the speed at which

career success is built. They figuratively convey the essentials of a theme underlying each path, namely visibility (Roadster), military esprit de corps and dedication (Humvee), technological development (Hybrid), and work/family balance (Sedan). Each of these metaphors exemplifies middle managers' profound motivations and values.

**Roadster: The Formula 1 Racing Car**

The Roadster's path to success is a rapid rise. The Roadster metaphorically describes individualistic and flamboyant career success, anchored mainly in individual visibility. Not only must the manager's actions be noticed by his or her peers and superiors, but roadsters are also people who are determined to go further, do more and push the so-called official boundaries to suc-

ceed: *"Unfortunately, doing your work well is not enough. If you stay in your corner, you won't go far. You have to be able to charge ahead, to exceed their expectations."* (InnoTech, R&D, no. 9). The Roadster metaphor translates the value of going above and beyond expectations in managers' definition of career success. This outperformance must be very visible to them. Nonetheless, it is only at InnoTech that the managers define success by exemplary performance coupled with individual visibility: *"If you want more, if you want success, you have to make more of an effort... you have to take the initiative and do more for your company...you have to show that you think positively"* (InnoTech, R&D, no. 11).

Middle managers who endorse the Roadster metaphor are positioned in a particular way relative to the view of the success that the organization projects: they buy-in completely to the organization's values and goals. Such middle managers spoke of "ownership," intrapreneurship, actions, and behaviors that translate a feeling that the organization "belongs to them." Therefore, middle managers who see themselves as Roadsters possess a global, complex and refined systemic understanding of the future of the company and its strategic issues.

There is full convergence between the profound motivations and values of these middle managers and the view of success the organization conveys. Middle managers deliberately position themselves as accepting the

Successive series of coding (both organizations in parallel, constant alternating reviews)
Initial coding with three basic themes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants' views of career success</li> <li>• View of career success endorsed and promoted by the organization</li> <li>• Participants' understanding of strategic organizational context</li> </ul>
Second phase of coding with additional themes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants' views of career success: 1) individual success, 2) colleagues' success</li> <li>• Organizational recognition</li> <li>• Strategic issues/understanding the organization strategy</li> <li>• Career path</li> </ul>
Third phase of coding with additional themes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managerial path, technical path, modern path</li> <li>• Pace of path</li> <li>• Political success</li> <li>• Peer recognition</li> <li>• Personal happiness</li> <li>• Individual visibility</li> <li>• Individual dedication</li> <li>• Evolution of participants' views of career success</li> </ul>
Clustering themes with five structural dimensions for each view of career success identified: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Central theme of each view of career success.</li> <li>• Individual tactics for each view of career success</li> <li>• Path associated with each view of career success</li> <li>• Organizational context in which each view of career success is observed</li> <li>• Specific understanding of strategic context in the organization</li> </ul>
In light of the clustering themes, four metaphors of career success were identified.



organization's vision of success completely.

The middle managers' individual visibility is not only built through preferred interactions that they develop and maintain strategically with supervisors, directors, or colleagues who will imminently be promoted to such positions. It is also built through the managers' actions, the positive impact of which is naturally well publicized given that their allies already occupy higher hierarchical positions. However, given these alliances, and the search for individual visibility and for short-term promotion, success is often perceived by other managers as resulting from an illegitimate political process: "You can be very visible without having done much, by stealing credit from others. Oh yes! In a large company like this, there are usurpers" (InnoTech, operations, no. 19). Being the target of negative perception is one of the risks managers incur.

The risk is aggravated for those who opt for outperformance and commit themselves in going above and beyond organizational expectations: "Performance is often accompanied by the hero syndrome...but it comes with the risk of wanting to do too much" (InnoTech, R&D, no. 14).

Another basic characteristic of the Roadster metaphor is that career success also rests on middle managers' feeling of true "happiness in going to work" each morning: "Being in a position where we are always unhappy every day, it's not really success" (InnoTech, R&D, no. 10).

### **Humvee: A Military Vehicle That Transports A Team Dedicated To Their Country**

With the Humvee, the path to success is a slower ascent than for Roadsters. The Humvee metaphorically translates a path in which the middle managers' individual success is built through the expression of high esprit de corps, enthusiasm, and dedication to the team and to the organization. This involves a filial pride by middle managers in "giving their life" to the organization: *I have the company's name tattooed on my heart*" (HighTeam, operations, no.2). "Success rests not only on the attainment of objectives assigned by top management but also on your willingness to do more, initiatives you take to exceed the objectives and therefore your capacity to deliver more than what the organization expects" (HighTeam, operations, no. 10). Like the Roadster, going above and beyond is emphasized. Nonetheless, conformity entails a particular relation, a near fusion with the group: "We all say 'I want to die here. I want to be here until I retire!'" (HighTeam, operations, no. 2).

Note that it is not only at HighTeam that the executives define success by outperformance marked by team visibility, dedication to the organization and unflagging demonstration of exemplary team spirit: "You are considered a stakeholder of the organization vision to realize. It's good to eliminate all unhealthy competition" (HighTeam, operations, no. 9). The adjective unhealthy is indeed related to the

taboo on individual visibility, which reflects the importance placed on the team. Accordingly, the perception of political success, that is success that is illegitimate or not resting on teamwork, is particularly acute: "Here it is important not to project oneself as someone who wants to scale the echelons... Talking about oneself and one's success is not accepted here" (HighTeam, operations, no. 16).

Middle managers who adopt the Humvee metaphor are proud to dedicate years of service to "their" organization. They think, talk, and act like an "intrapreneur" (entrepreneurial spirit, within an organization) and strive to gain a global systemic understanding of the future of the organization and its strategic issues. The expression "their" organization indicates that such middle managers are positioned very favorably relative to the company's view of success (HighTeam). Nonetheless, although they shared its meaning completely, they also value the feeling of being happy at work, which also structures their view of success: "Career success also means wanting to work the next day. It also comes from you" (HighTeam, operations, no. 9). This is another similarity with the previous metaphor.

### **The Hybrid: A Modern High Tech Vehicle That Uses Two Energy Sources**

The hybrid metaphorically evokes a career path through which career success is built slowly, that is through various imposing complex projects,



each offering diverse important scientific challenges that gradually fuel the middle manager's personal development. This metaphor also conveys science-based individual visibility because the expertise on which success is built is not widely shared in the organization: *"I have become a type of knowledge centre in this particular technological area. Colleagues from here and elsewhere, other plants, come see me. I even get calls from Singapore or England"* (InnoTech, R&D, no. 4).

Middle managers who embrace the Hybrid metaphor aspire to the status of legend within the company through a major scientific discovery that effectively drives the company to a leadership position in its industry: *"finding a solution can transform you into a god in the company because of the impacts of the discovery"* (InnoTech, R&D, no. 5).

Hybrid middle managers' understanding of their organization focuses on internal technological development processes or technological improvement. The fact that this metaphor was observed only at InnoTech is easily explained by the fact that the main research and development activities at HighTeam took place at the head office located in another city, unlike at InnoTech.

Because of their scientific, and therefore very limited, understanding of the organization, middle managers who endorse this metaphor position themselves at odds with the view of success promoted by the organization. They have a shared positioning: they partially endorse the organization's view of

success put, but also demonstrate a strong conviction that this success necessarily rests on their professional development. These middle managers justify their rejection of the managerial versatility inherent in the organization's view of success by arguing that it constrains their scientific and technological advancement. The organization's recognition of managerial versatility thus clashes with the recognition granted to individuals that have achieved success as a confirmed expert: *"We do not all aspire to be president. Me, I would rather have a technically very strong colleague on my team, someone who can understand all the technological problems. It's people like that who make our team stronger ... and successfully defend us, when necessary, during technical meetings"* (InnoTech, R&D, no. 2).

A final characteristic of the Hybrid metaphor has also been observed in the previous case: like the Humvees, these middle managers feel that career success rests firmly on the feeling of being happy at work: *"Success is also a question of personal choice. It's what makes us happy"* (InnoTech, R&D, no. 5).

### **The Sedan: A Spacious Vehicle Designed for Family Outings**

The Sedan metaphorically evokes a career path within which career success is built slowly, to ensure the harmonization of work and personal life. This metaphor rejects the classic linear path in which a series of hierarchical promotions are ac-

companied by growing and therefore increasingly heavy *managerial responsibilities*: *"Not everyone wants to be president of the company"* (InnoTech, R&D, no. 16). *"I'm not trying to over-perform; I want to be recognized, to gain recognition, to be appreciated, but it shouldn't take up too much space in my life either"* (HighTeam, operations, no. 17). According to this metaphor, success lies not in the prestige of the position held, but in the balance between work life and personal life, a balance the middle manager painstakingly selects, builds, and protects: *"Success is someone who has a balanced personal life, that is someone who can achieve a balance between professional life and family life"* (HighTeam, operations, no. 3). Although the previous metaphors integrated the feeling of being happy at work, this quality is fundamental to the Sedan metaphor: *"Career success means being true to what we love to do"* (HighTeam, operations, no. 17); *"When our work reflects who we are, that's success"* (InnoTech, R&D, no. 17).

Middle managers' constant effort to preserve work/life balance leads them to remain independent from the organization; this freedom is particularly precious for them. Freedom is translated by the rejection of supervisors' invitations to apply for higher positions in the hierarchy: *"I do not want to rise in the hierarchy. My current work is enough for me"* (InnoTech, R&D, no. 17); *"Some of my colleagues, like me, even refused to apply for higher positions although our immediate supervisor*



strongly encourages us to. We refused because the promotion for us would be equivalent to losing our independence” (HighTeam, R&D, no. 18). This freedom that the middle managers mention reflects their need to respect their authenticity or the unique nature of their being. It also expresses their profound conviction that conformism hinders the success of the organization and that it is respect for every employee and their work/life balance that fuels the real creative capacity of the organization: “Society places enormous importance on the status of the position held, the salary you earn, the kind of car you drive and things like that. It is only one aspect of success. We’re all different. Diversity is not a hindrance to organizational success: it’s an advantage” (InnoTech, R&D, no. 15).

Lastly, the Sedan metaphor corresponds to an understanding of the organization and its strategic context that is restricted to the parameters of the managers’ responsibilities. Largely targeting the operational short-term level, it is well grounded in the present moment.

**Evolution of Metaphors**

The interviews conducted highlight changes in metaphors triggered by the organizational context. At InnoTech, managers evolved from Hybrids to Roadsters, whereas at HighTeam, both the Humvee and the Sedan were reinforced.

At InnoTech, senior managers regularly screen employees and identify, among the managers they supervise, the most promis-

ing successors who can follow their example. These executives seek to cultivate in targeted managers potential conformity with their own success. Senior managers then begin a negotiation process intended to instill in their potential successors the preferred metaphor-the Roadster: “In each context, our definition of success changes. I started by telling myself that professional development was the criterion ... Before, for me success was ‘are you good technically?’ For me it was ‘does he know what he’s talking about?’ ... I wanted to do a PhD but instead my immediate supervisor gave me management tasks. I didn’t want to, but he convinced me ... I think that was when I had a change of paradigm in my career InnoTech, operations, no. 14).

ing vision of quality, and value-added management, along with accentuated objectives related to efficiency. Senior managers’ discourse conveyed this new vision and the related implications for managers’ individual success. The interviews show that for some this reinforced the adherence to the Humvee metaphor: “We felt a positive turn begin, a turn in the sense that we are more oriented toward objectives, meeting objectives is primordial...Are you engaged, mobilized to meet these new objectives? The organization recognizes it. It is the company that changed, so success did too” (HighTeam, operations, no. 2).

Nonetheless, in parallel with this reinforcement of the Humvee, there was a reinforcement of the Sedan, that is an even

Repertoire of metaphors for success

	Roadster Formula 1 racing car	Humvee Military Vehicle That Transports a Team Dedicated to Their Country	Hybrid A Modern High Tech Vehicle That Uses Two Energy Sources	Sedan A Spacious Vehicle Designed For Family Outings
Frame of definition of success	Organization	Organization	Organization, scientific community	Organization and family
Individual tactics	Investment in alliances with top managers	Investment in the team	Investment in professional development	Investment in work/life balance
Path	Ascending, rapid	Ascending, slow	Slow spiral (through scientific projects)	Slow ascending, spiral, or transitory
Context	Innovation	Efficiency	Innovation	Innovation and efficiency
Understanding of strategic context	Systemic, global long-term vision	Systemic, global long-term vision	Understanding restricted to internal technological development or improvement processes long-term vision	Understanding moderated by the future of the company, targeted to operations, in a vision of the present moment

At HighTeam, a change in CEO ushered in a more demand-

more pronounced withdrawal from the new metaphor of suc-



cess promoted by the organization by middle managers who already identified with the Sedan: “*Before this change, we were more autonomous here. We began to feel like they were imposing things that will be even more complicated. It’s a work surplus.... I say no to that!*” (HighTeam, operations, no. 16).

### Discussion

The objective of this article was to help career practitioners and counsellors better understand the career success of middle managers who may be among their clientele. Because managers are increasingly asked to be more autonomous in their careers and career success, informed coaching by a career practitioner has become even more strategic. Counsellors can also help their clients achieve a balance between who they are, how they choose to position themselves relative to the organization’s metaphor of success, and how they choose to revise/adapt their positioning to organizational change and life design (Guichard 2008). Keeping this balance implies individual choices related to conformity and even going above and beyond, which the organization may unofficially demand.

Although admittedly not exhaustive, these results form a repertoire of four spatial metaphors: the Roadster (individual visibility), the Humvee (esprit de corps), the Hybrid (professional development), and the Sedan (harmonization of work life and personal life). These metaphors are useful because

they facilitate professional and personal exploration by raising questions that can help middle managers determine which metaphors are most salient for them and why? Which metaphors, in their view, are emphasized the most at the workplace? How can they choose to position themselves relative to these metaphors and why?

Because all these questions refer to middle managers’ profound motivations and values, the metaphor is decidedly distinct from a déjà-vu of Schein’s classic career anchors (1978). On the one hand, each metaphor reflects a dimension of success for oneself, such as the importance of doing work that reflects one’s values and profound motivations (e.g., the need to feel happy at work, mentioned in the interviews). On the other hand, metaphors indicate the dimension of success for others, such as the importance of adapting to one’s context and the choice of individual positioning relative to the metaphor promoted by the organization. Further, if anchors are static, as Mercure et al. (1991) contend, metaphors are not. Because they are embedded in a context, they evolve with it. A change in CEO, as occurred at HighTeam, or an institutionalized negotiation process such as that found at InnoTech, may modify the metaphor middle managers adopt.

In Hartung’s review of the last decade of career counselling (2009) he identifies four historical milestones in this evolving field. Career anchors belong to the differential tradition of the early 20th century, whereas the

present repertoire of metaphors is more consistent with the social-cognitive tradition (last quarter of the 20th century), which contextualizes career success. This model emphasizes the contractual relationship between the individual and the organization, which is illustrated by the middle manager’s positioning relative to the metaphor of success promoted by the organization. The repertoire can also be seen as being subordinate to the constructivist-social constructionist model (early 21st century) because the observed evolution of metaphors supports the idea that middle managers construct “their” reality based on their understanding of their contextualized experiences. Their reflexive understanding influences their interactions and actions, just as their thoughts are influenced by their positioning relative to the outperformance valued by and in the organization.

The results also showed that the classic path *is not unique*. The repertoire points to two classic linear trajectories in which success is built differently. The first rests on individual visibility and refers to the metaphor of the Roadster. The second rests on high esprit de corps and refers to the Humvee metaphor in which individual visibility is, in contrast, taboo. These two classic career success paths share rapid hierarchical linearity and pressure to exceed expectations, go above and beyond and outperform one’s peers. However, they differ fundamentally in the contextual significance of this outperformance. Future research might explore different organizational contexts to determine



whether the classic ascending path has additional forms of expression. In addition, if the results presented here have not demonstrated differences between male and female participants, future research could consist in a comparative analysis in another field. Research published to date has implied that gender-based differences indeed exist (see Orser & Leck, 2010, or Eddleston et al., 2004).

Lastly, the study has limitations arising from its exploratory approach, and its field uniquely comprising middle managers in the Québec aeronautics industry. The transferability and validity of this repertoire, therefore, remains to be confirmed: can it be observed among people working in other organizational contexts or industries? Further research could attempt to answer this question.

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