MIDDLE LEVEL MANAGEMENT ROLE IN CHAMPIONING ALTERNATIVES AND STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION AMONG INSURANCE COMPANIES IN KENYA

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International Academic Journal of Human Resource and Business Administration

(IAJHRBA) | ISSN 2518-2374

Received: 1st February 2022

Published: 3rd March 2022

Full Length Research

Available Online at: https://iajournals.org/articles/iajhrba_v3_i10_379_391.pdf

Citation: Wamugo, D., Kirimi, E., Ndabari M. (2022). Middle level management role in championing alternatives and strategy implementation among insurance companies in Kenya. *International Academic Journal of Human Resource and Business Administration*, *3*(10), 379-391.

ABSTRACT

Middle level managers have a significant role in organizational strategic outcomes and activities particularly implementation of strategy. Middle level managers gather information and make sense of it in line with any issues relevant to organizational strategy making it the basis for strategic decision-making. Anchored on Open system theory, the study sought to establish the role of middle level management in championing alternatives and how it affects strategy implementation among insurance companies in Kenya. A descriptive research design was used. The study used the stratified random sampling technique to achieve sample population of 189 management staff in insurance companies in Kenya using Self-administered questionnaires were used to obtain primary data. The validity of the research instruments was then checked using content and construct validity. The study found that communication and interpretation of strategies and organizational plans and objectives affected the strategy implementation in the organization to a great extent. The study concluded that championing alternatives had great effect on the strategy implementation among insurance companies in Kenya.

The study recommended that the involvement of middle level management ought to at the very minimum be represented at the strategic planning stage as it increases ownership of the process by the middle level managers and cultivate a marked will to see the strategy succeed. The study further recommends that communication of the strategy to all stake holders including Middle level managers is paramount and that they ought to have direct access to the main decision making individuals or organs in the organisation.

KeyWords: Strategic implementation, Championing alternatives, Middle level managers, organizational strategy, strategic planning, communication.

INTRODUCTION

Strategic management is defined as a set of decisions and actions that result in the development and implementation of plans to achieve an organization's goals (Caldwell, 2017).It’s achieved by formulating the vision, assessing the external environment, assessing options, selecting the appropriate options, developing long term objectives and implementing the strategic choices. Strategy implementation is the execution of the choices and activities of a strategic plan. It is the process following the development of programs, procedures, plans vide which all policies, strategies and plans are put into action. This is done by budgeted resources allocation, evaluating success (Cummings & Worley, 2014).

In a hierarchical organization, middle level management is the intermediate management that reports to executive management and is in charge of at least two lower levels of junior personnel (Dalton, 2017). Middle level management are different from line managers because they are seen as a higher senior management position with a comparable salary and benefits package The primary responsibility of middle level managers is to implement company strategy in the most effective manner possible. Creating a productive working environment, supervising the work process while assuring compliance with the organization's regulations, managing employees, and reporting to the highest level of management are among their responsibilities (Sanner, Halford, Vengberg & Röing, 2018).

The empowerment of middle level managers is essential for effective strategy implementation (Kuyvenhoven & Buss, 2017) as they can access any level of the organisation. Many studies have been conducted including a study done in Australia on the role of middle level managers in strategy execution, middle level managers were accountable to senior managers for providing important performance metrics, which were the result of a team effort. They also serve as senior management's eyes and ears, alerting them to potential difficulties so that they can respond effectively (Radaelli & Sitton Kent, 2016). In UK, studies have shown that effective involvement of middle level management is paramount for effective strategy implementation. While structure provides an overall framework for strategy implementation, Pearce and Robinson (2013) contend that it is not sufficient in and of itself to assure successful execution.

In order for any business to achieve its objectives, effective plan execution is required, necessitating the organizations to master the art of plan implementation (Harun, Muraguri & Kahuthia, 2019). In South Africa, management plays an essential part in providing guidance in an organization through its strategy execution procedure. Accordingly Suleiman (2017), management develops the needed strategies and also directs their companies in putting them into action by warranting that the necessary human and financial resources are in place, as well as developing a strategy implementation schedule to guide the process and serve as a control mechanism during implementation. In Nigeria, there has been more focus on strategy formulation and planning than on implementation, Palladan, Abdulkadir and Chong, (2016) postulates that this may be due to the fact that people are of the view that strategy formulation is more important and alluring than implementation.

The biggest challenge and bottleneck in organizations, especially in the Kenyan context is successful execution and actualizing the policies and strategies that have been set up by the organization in aid of fulfilling their key objectives (Northouse, 2018). Furthermore, it has been suggested that the lack of participation of middle level management prevents the organisation from achieving the benefits that are enjoyed through middle level management involvement and this harms the organisation's strategizing effort (Chen, Berman & Wang, 2017).

Herzing and Jimmieson (2016) define the middle level management as individuals that operate below the senior management team. The middle level management adopt and operate strategies that the senior executives develop and lead. Floyd & Woodridge (2014) concluded that middle level management carry out the work of actualising the plans and decisions of the senior management.

Middle level managers play the role of bridging the gap between the strategic and operational levels of a company by championing alternatives. The persistent and compelling transmission of strategic choices to senior management is referred to as championing alternatives. This function differs from aiding adaptability in that it focuses on persuading corporate management to change their existing strategic notion. Van Rensburg et al. (2014) chose to categorize the championing activity as a managerial position rather than a role. Strategy champions, according to his research, are people of an organization that endeavour to impact strategic concerns in ways that go beyond their immediate and primary operational tasks, as well as the expectations of others.

This activity is ascending and integrative in nature, and it is about the middle-level managers expectations to push philosophies and their capability to partake in bottom-up efforts that might help their businesses renew strategy processes. Middle-level managers come up with differences to the present strategy and propose them to senior administrators together with employee suggestions. The goal of championing alternatives is to build strong impetus for the initiative and keep top management informed (Schreurs, 2010). Middle-level managers will get more influence over their future in the organization and will become a vital part of it if they are included in planning. It is critical for middle-level administrators to engage in planning, as this might help them feel less alienated or deal with targets that they did not contribute to developing or agreeing to (Floyd & Woodridge, 2014).

Most insurance companies in Kenya have a hierarchical structure where the organisation is divided into various departments headed by managers and deputy managers reporting to operations managers or directors who report to the chief executive officer (Akhusama & Moturi, 2016). The said insurance industry faces many challenges especially low penetration rate, customers demand more open and accessible products as technology revolutionizes risk analysis, consumer profiling, and old business models are put at risk, and new entrants attempt to pick off the most successful company models (Wachira, 2013). For all the above players, the insurance Penetration rate stands at 2.4 per cent (Australian Institute of Management, 2014c).

In Kenya, the insurance sector has been performing poorly even though it has an important role in facilitating development and it is important in economic growth in the country (Kline, 2015) Moreover, irrespective of their dynamic nature and for them to remain competitive in a sector that faces turbulence, there must be continuous innovation, and close monitoring of the ever-changing customer needs and demands, analyse competition and come up with strategies to help them remain afloat (Nyambane, 2017). The middle level managers' input is yet to be considered much in strategy implementation. Additionally, middle level managers have not received requisite support from top management by involving them in formulation as well as execution of strategy since they understand what the customers' needs are due to their day to day interactions with them and the staff in operational levels (Jafar, 2017).

Companies also perform poorly due to competition for the small insurable population while they are guilty of providing the same similar products and mediocre claims and customer service. Management's use of the firm's value creation capability, inherent dynamic and functional abilities, and distinctive core competencies could possibly explain the difference in success (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014). Failure of middle level managers to champion alternatives and synthesizing information has been a leading challenge for insurance firms to implement strategies. Most of middle level managers have also failed in facilitating adaptability and management of operational effectiveness. This has led to poor implementation of various strategies in insurance companies (Jaoua, 2018).

Reviewed local studies (Nyambane, 2017; Nyong'a, 2019; Jafar, 2017; Al Shirawi, 2015 and Chacha, 2018) did not critically address the various strategic roles of middle level management such as championing differences, synthesizing data, enabling adaptability and management of operational effectiveness in strategy implementation among insurance companies in Kenya. Studies by Nyambane (2017) and Nyong'a (2019) were narrow and suffered from conceptual gaps since they mainly addressed general management and strategic leadership. The study by Chacha (2018) experienced from a contextual gap since its main focus was on the selected government ministries in Kenya as the focus of the current study is on insurance companies. The study by Jafar (2017) and Al Shirawi (2015) being desk based, the study suffered from methodological shortcomings while it also reviews a different contextual area (insurance companies). Therefore as a result of these conceptual and contextual gaps the current study sought to establish role of middle level management in championing alternatives and how this affects strategy implementation among insurance companies In Kenya.

Theoretical Review

There are various theories that have been postulated and made theoretical and empirical contributions in the field of strategic management and the role of middle level management in strategic implementation. To espouse the same, the Open System Theory showed the studies done on their role as regards championing alternatives in strategy implementation among insurance companies in Kenya. Von Bertalanffy (1956) was the first to create open system theory. According to Klimontovich (2012), open systems theory is the notion that organizations leadership is intensely subjective to the organizational surrounding. The surrounding comprises of other firms that put forth numerous forces consisting of social, political, economic, technological, informational, and ecological (Frohman & Johnson, 2012). The needs of a changing environment are used to evaluate internal leadership. External influences place fresh demands on the company, forcing it to act, comply, adapt, and innovate. Suitable reactions to external pressures lead to interactions that benefit both the company and the constituencies it serves. The organizational relationship with the external environment can be viewed in terms of give and take relationship where in the receiving end; various inputs are obtained by the organization from its surroundings. On the receiving end, the firm gives back to the environment what it has developed in form of employment, education market competition and enhanced community safety, while on the giving end, the firm gives back to the environment what it has produced in form of staff, supplies, loans, clients, and payments for services (Cummings & Worley, 2014).

Open systems survive and flourish by constantly gathering resources, producing self-regulation information feedback loops and restoring a steady state or equilibrium following a system disruption induced by its surroundings. As a result, the systems can achieve a specific goal in a variety of ways, depending on the circumstances in the environment (Sanner, Halford, Vengberg & Röing, 2018). In order to deliver better services, insurance companies adopt new management practices, adopt new technology, or engage in new activities; therefore their dedication to the proposed strategy will be an indicator of their total dedication to its implementation (Dalton, 2017). Furthermore, insurance businesses are depicted as open systems, with the degree of openness increasing as the amount of information shared by the insurance system with its environment increases. As a result, there may be more unplanned changes because the organizational system does not have enough control over its surroundings to prevent such events (Lenkkeri, 2012). According to Williams, strategic implementation is an action-oriented concept aimed at increasing the effectiveness of organizations by concentrating on the environmental context in which they operate and assisting in the production of decisions that are environmentally friendly. This theory is relevant to this study as it helped in the grounding of the role of middle level managers in championing on strategy implementation among insurance companies in Kenya.

Empirical Studies

Studies have been conducted both locally and internationally to support strategic role of middle level management in strategy implementation among insurance companies, but these studies have produced mixed results.

Musyoka (2016) examined the Kenya's National Health Insurance Fund's strategy implementation determinants and used a descriptive study method. Rather than testing an anticipated link between variables, this methodology was utilized to characterize variables. Firms with a positive workplace culture and competent Organizational leadership strongly and positively connected to strategic implementation.

Madegwa (2014) examined the Factors affecting strategy implementation in government Parastatals focusing on national cereals and produce board (NCPB) of Kenya. The study found that a lack of coordination and communication causes implementations to take longer than intended and has a detrimental impact on the NCPB strategy implementation.

Kyalo, Katuse and Kiriri (2016) focused on how firm leaders affect implementation of a strategy at Kenya tourism industry, specifically, Kenya Government Tourism Agencies. The goal was to ascertain the impact of organizational leadership on plan implementation. The study discovered that components of leadership, such as staff engagement, reward and motivation were substantially connected with the achievement of objectives and profit attainment, which measured execution of a strategy.

Ochola (2016) looked at the factors that influence strategy implementation in Kenyan public health institutions in Mombasa County and employed a descriptive survey research approach. The correlation coefficient and descriptive statistics were adopted in the analysis of data. The study established that there is a positive strong connection amid organizational structure and monitoring and evaluation to positive strategy implementation.

Research Methodology

In this study, a descriptive research design was used. The target audience was 371 selected management professionals from 55 insurance companies in Kenya. Respondents were chosen using a stratified random sampling methodology. Using Cochran's formula, the sample size was determined at a 95% confidence level with a 0.05 error.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where **n** = sample size

N = target population

e is the acceptable margin of era

n = {371 / (1+371*(0.05*0.05)}

= 189

Self-administered questionnaires were used to collect primary data. The survey includes both open-ended and closed-ended questions. Primary data was collected through the use of structured questionnaires. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics and qualitative data collected from the open ended questions was analysed using content analysis. Inferential data analysis was done using Pearson’s Product Moment Correlation and regression analysis. The relationships between the independent and dependent variables were established using regression analysis. The regression model in this study assumed the following equation;

$$Y= \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \varepsilon$$

Where:-Y= Strategy implementation among insurance companies in Kenya

β_0=constant

$\beta_{1,}$ = regression coefficient

X_1= Championing alternatives

ε=Error Term

Results

Having administered 189 questionnaires and with a response of 139 this gave a response rate of 73.6% which is above 50% and is considered significant response rate for a statistical analysis as prescribed by Kumar (2019). In this study, a regression analysis was conducted to test the influence on predictor variable. The study used a regression model to test the effects of championing alternatives on strategy implementation among insurance companies in Kenya.

Table 1: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.955[a]	.913	.910	.95135

a. Predictors: (Constant) Championing Alternatives

As shown above, the study revealed that adjusted R-square value is 0.910, which indicates that the championing alternatives explain 91.0% of the variation in the dependent variable (strategy implementation among insurance companies in Kenya) leaving 9.0% percent unexplained. This implies that there are other factors that affect strategy implementation among insurance companies in Kenya that were not covered in this study.

Table 2: ANOVA Results

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1269.354	1	1269.354	1433.896	.000[b]
	Residual	121.279	137	0.885		
	Total	**1390.633**	**138**			

a. Dependent Variable: Strategy Implementation

b. Predictor: (Constant) Championing Alternatives

The results revealed that the model had predictive value and thus it was significant since its p-value was less than 5%, p=.000 and F calculated (1433.896) was significantly greater than the critical F value (2.4392).

Table 3: Regression Coefficientsa

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
	(Constant)	-2.564	1.230		-2.085	.039
	Championing Alternatives	.738	.128	.423	5.749	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Strategy Implementation

The findings presented show that championing alternatives and strategy implementation among insurance companies in Kenya had a positive and significant relationship (β=0.738, $p=0.000<0.05$). As per the findings, at 95% confidence level, the study revealed that championing alternatives had a great effect on the strategy implementation among insurance companies in Kenya. This implied that the presence of change initiatives, managing barriers and resistance to change, and presence of feedback mechanisms from staff were the main variables that affected the successful execution of the organization's plans, objectives and activities. This depicted that advising top management on requirements for change, and persistent and persuasive strategic options to senior management had a minimal effect to the successful execution of the organization's plans, objectives and activities.

The findings provide enough evidence to reject the null hypothesis (Ho) that championing alternatives does not significantly affect strategy implementation among insurance companies in Kenya.

Discussions

The study found that communication and interpretation of strategies/ organizational plans and objectives affected the strategy implementation in the organisation to a great extent. The findings were in agreement with Van Rensburg et al. (2014) who chose to categorize the championing activity as a managerial position instead of a role. According to this research, strategy champions are members of organisations who endeavour to impact strategic concerns in ways that go beyond their immediate and primary operational tasks, as well as the expectations of others. The research established that the presence of change initiatives, managing barriers and resistance to change, and presence of feedback mechanisms from staff affected successful execution of the organization's plans, objectives and activities to a great extent. Middle-level managers come up with differences to the present strategy and propose them to senior administrators together with employee suggestions. The goal of championing alternatives is to build strong impetus for the initiative and keep top management informed (Schreurs, 2010).

Further, the research found that advising top management on requirements for change, and persistent and persuasive strategic options to senior management affected successful execution of the organization's plans, objectives and activities to a moderate extent. The findings were in agreement with Floyd & Woodridge (2014) who stated that the middle-level managers get more influence over their future in the organization and become a vital part of it if they are included in planning. It is critical for middle-level administrators to engage in planning, as this might help them feel less alienated or deal with targets that they did not contribute to developing or agreeing to.

Conclusion

The study found that championing alternatives has a positive and significant effect on the strategy implementation among insurance companies in Kenya. When a middle level manager is championing alternatives to the top management his creativity is promoted. The study found that championing alternatives by the middle level managers to the top management promotes and encourages creativity which goes a long way to feed into the modification and creation of future strategies as the vantage position of the middle level manager allows him the unique opportunity to analyse strategies and suggest improvements. This further shows that middle level management are leading the change initiatives thus creating a knock on effect ensuring seamless change due to the fact that they are managing the barriers and cushioning resistance to change thus ensuring productivity is enhanced. However, this is greatly dependant on consistent follow up and review of the inputs and outputs of the process. In this dynamic era organisations are engaged in, it would be beneficial to the top management to ensure that the middle level managers while analysing the environment, ensure they continuously suggest possible solutions which feeds into future strategies. This would certainly increase the organizational performance as it promotes motivation of the staff.

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