MASTER THESIS

THE IMPACT OF VISIONARY LEADERSHIP ON MIDDLE MANAGEMENT

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1. INTRODUCTION

Strategy, a set of critical choices, is an important aspect in how companies achieve their objectives and create their long-term success. Based on its strategy, a company can create a strong ground for competitive advantage (Barney, 1996) and distinguish itself in how it meets its customers' needs (Porter & Thomas, 2015). In other words, a company's strategy creates a unique and valuable market position and involves a different set of activities for a long period of time (Porter, 1996).

Brilliant strategies however do not always bring companies great competitive positions on their markets. According to Burgelman (1991), Lee and Puranam (2016) and Noble (1999) a well formulated strategy becomes ineffective when people throughout the company fail or are unable to translate the formulated strategy and put it into practice. Therefore, to stay competitive a company needs solid execution of its strategy (Neilson, Martin, & Powers, 2008). Unfortunately, when it comes to strategy execution most companies struggle (Neilson et al., 2008). Research performed by Neilson et al. (2008) indicates that most companies fail because they ignore the most important and powerful drivers for effective strategy execution.

On the assumption of the importance of solid strategy execution (Neilson, Martin, & Powers, 2008) and that most companies struggle when executing strategy (Neilson et al., 2008), creating commitment for strategy can be a challenge (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Beer & Eisenstat, 2000; Hailey & Balogun, 2002; Labianca, Gray, & Brass, 2000). To reach collective success, leadership is crucial (Burke, Stashevsky & Burke, 2006; Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010; Zaccaro, Ely & Conjar, 2009). Therefore, leadership at all levels is required for strategy execution to be successful (O'Reilly, Caldwell, Chatman, Lapiz, & Self, 2010; Woolridge, Schmid, & Floyd, 2008; Balogun & Johnson,

2005; Floyd & Woolridge, 1999). And that is why managers on top-, middle and operational level play a vital role in executing strategy and achieving strategic goals (Ates, Tarakci, Porck, Van Knippenberg, & Groenen, 2018). A manager's strategic role depends however on his position and is based on his hierarchical level (Floyd & Lane, 2000). For example, strategy can only be successfully executed when top management demonstrates visionary leadership (Neilson et al., 2008). And, for an organization to successfully implement its strategy, the role of middle managers in the strategy process (Woolridge, Schmid and Floyd, 2008), and their psychological processes, such as positive and negative feelings (Dess, 1987), must be taken into account (Woolridge, Schmid and Floyd, 2008).

Various management roles

According to Floyd and Lane (2000), top management's role, when it comes to executing strategy, can be specified into formalizing strategy and directing all activities towards desired outcomes. Middle management is responsible for strategy execution (Floyd & Lane, 2000). From that perspective, middle management facilitates and guides employees, shares information and creates adaptability (Floyd & Lane, 2000). Towards top management, it is middle management that synthesizes, blends strategic hands-on information, sells issues, presents alternatives, and champions strategy (Floyd & Lane, 2000). Operational management's role in the strategy execution process focusses on conforming, adjusting, and experimenting (Floyd & Lane, 2000).

Of the various management roles that are part of the strategy process, middle managers have a unique position and deploy a critical set of interactions (Floyd & Woolridge, 1992; Kanter, 1982). Especially since middle managers evaluate information that is related to

the company's strategy (Floyd & Woolridge, 1992; Kanter, 1982), its operations and its markets. Therefore, part of middle managers' role is to bring top management's attention to strategic issues and support their understandings of situations (Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, Hayes, & Wierba, 1997; Dutton & Ashford, 1993).

Given their role and position, middle managers have more knowledge of the company's strategic situation than managers at an operating level (Walsh, 1995). More than top managers, middle managers are familiar with operational issues, product markets and factor markets (Walsh, 1995). Middle managers interpret strategy and translate it into actions for the daily operations (Woolridge et al., 2008; Floyd &Woolridge, 1992). Also, middle managers communicate required actions and explain logic of the company strategy to their direct reports (Woolridge et al., 2008; Floyd & Woolridge, 1992). Therefore, middle management has a critical and established role when it comes to their influence on the process of strategy execution and its outcomes (Huy, 2011). Middle manager's strategic role can simply be distinguished by unique combinations of cognitive and behavioural components (Woolridge et al., 2008; Floyd and Woolridge, 1992).

Strategy literature highlights that middle management is often strategically misaligned. This means that middle management's view and understanding of the company strategy often deviates from the company strategy as formulated and determined by top management (Meyer, 2006; Woolridge & Floyd, 1990; Burgelman, 1991; Guth & Macmillan, 1986). Literature also emphasizes that middle management often is not strategically committed and therefore takes efforts that are counterproductive or even sabotage strategy implementation (Meyer, 2006; Woolridge & Floyd, 1990; Burgelman, 1991; Guth & Macmillan, 1986). Middle management should therefore not always be

expected to be strategically aligned and strategically committed to the pursuit of implementation of the company strategy as formulated and defined by top management.

Research done by Ateş et al. (2018) demonstrate that when middle management is not strategically aligned and not strategically committed to top management's strategy it negatively relates with strategic alignment and strategic commitment throughout the company. According to Ateş et al. (2018), middle management's actions can even inflict commitment to strategy throughout the entire company and ultimately harm strategy execution. For successful strategy execution it is therefore important that middle management is aligned and committed to the company strategy.

According to Neilson et al. (2008) strategy can only be successfully executed when top management demonstrates visionary leadership and influences middle management (Love, Priem, & Lumpkin, 2002; Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Mintzberg, 1978). Research however does not provide much theories and insight on how top management can influence middle management for them to become strategically committed and to take on a key role in effectively implementing strategy. Without comprehension of these aspects there is a lacuna in our understanding of how top management's visionary leadership effects middle management's strategic commitment (Woolridge et al., 2008; Hutzschenreuter, & Kleindienst, 2006; Balogun, 2003; Huy, 2002). To contribute to existing literature a qualitative research on top management's visionary leadership and its effect on strategic commitment among middle management in the hospitality industry will be conducted in the hospitality sector.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review provides the theoretical reasoning for this research. It is also the basis for theory development and is leading to identify gaps in existing literature. This literature review aims to create an understanding of concepts on strategy processes, visionary leadership, strategic alignment, and strategic commitment among middle management, as key variables in this study.

2.1 Strategy processes

To get an understanding of strategy processes, a definition of the meaning of process within the context of strategic management is required (Van de Ven, 1992).

In literature on strategic management, the meaning of process differs in three ways (Van de Ven, 1992). First, the meaning of process is explained as a logic explanation of the relationship between dependent and independent variables (Van de Ven, 1992). Second, as categorized concepts referring to actions performed by individuals or organizations, and third, as sequential events that indicate how things change over time (Van de Ven, 1992).

The most frequent used meaning of process is process as categories of concepts that are related to actions by individuals and organizations (Van de Ven, 1992). Examples of these categories are frequency of communication, decision making techniques, workflows, strategy formulation and implementation (Van de Ven, 1992).

According to Van de Ven (1992) statements that address how and reasons why a strategy develops over time can be defined as a theory of process. Such theory helps to understand the basic concepts on strategy related to formulation, implementation, or any other substantive topic (Van de Ven, 1992). Van de Ven and Poole (1991) found that there are

theories that distinguish four elemental categories of theories. These four different categories are based on principally different logics that stand for concealed generative structures or laws (Tsoukas, 1989), can be classified as life cycle, teleology, dialectics, and evolution (Van de Ven, 1992).

Teleology is frequently understood as a category of process theory (Van de Ven, 1992), which can be translated into how and why strategy can be successfully executed. Basic assumption of the teleology process theory is that the establishing body is purposeful and adaptive by itself or when interacting with others (Van de Ven, 1992). An anticipated end state is socially constructed and from alternatives it selects a course of actions to reach the end state (Van de Ven, 1992).

Recent studies that focus on the strategy processes and its practices explain that strategy in terms of formulating and implementing strategy is merely about actions and interactions between various actors throughout the company (Jarzabkowski, & Spee, 2009; Hoon, 2007). In line with these studies and the teleological theory of process, a major component in the research on strategy process has identified that each management level plays a strategic role (Floyd & Lane, 2000). According to these studies, top management has a decision-making role, while middle management has its focus on communicating information between management at top and operational levels (Floyd & Lane, 2000). The role of management on an operational level can be defined as a reaction to information from higher management levels, from the markets, or from both (Floyd & Lane, 2000).

In the field of strategic management there are also scholars that focus on interpersonal process perspectives. These scholars suggest that top management uses their interactions

with members of the company to generate commitment and to create a shared understanding of the formulated strategy, especially with the ones that will have to implement the formulated strategy (Noble, 1999; Floyd & Woolridge, 1992a; Hambrick & Cannella, 1989). Therefore, while interacting throughout the company, top management's objective is to ensure organizational recognition, ownership by individuals, and motivation for decisions to implement their strategy (Ketokivi & Castaner, 2004; Dooley & Fryxell, 1999; Amason, 1996).

2.2 Strategy execution

Strategic roles of top management and middle management have been studied separately (Mantere, 2008; Floyd & Lane, 2000; Floyd & Woolridge,1992b). When it comes to the strategy execution process, top management is responsible for implementing strategy (Floyd & Lane, 2000). In practice, it is middle management that executes it (Berson & Avolio, 2004). Berson and Avolio (2004) discuss how top management's actions influence middle management in how they translate and communicate strategy. It is interesting to see that when executing strategy, middle management influences top management and aims to receive resources for implementation, and to have their input and initiatives accepted (Martin & Eisenhardt, 2010; Currie & Procter, 2005; Floyd & Woolridge, 1997). Also, middle management tries to influence which issues will be part of the strategic agenda or secure top management's buy-in on strategic actions (Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill & Lawrence, 2001; Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, Hayes & Wierba, 1997; Dutton & Ashford, 1993).

Therefore, when it comes to formulating and implementing strategy, top management and middle management try to influence each other and while doing so a mutual influencing process takes place (Raes, Heijltjes, Glunk & Roe, 2007). The primary objective of this

process is to influence forces of stability and change (Raes et al., 2007). A conclusion to be drawn is that in the strategy process there is an interdependent relationship between top management and middle management (Ancona, 1989; Edmondson, Roberto, & Watkins, 2003; Raes et al., 2007). Based on this conclusion, it is not unlikely that discrepancies between the roles of top management and middle management regarding themselves and each other exist (Raes et al., 2007). This conclusion provides arguments and reasons for further research on the extent to which top management's visionary leadership has its influence on middle management's strategic commitment.

2.3 Visionary leadership

Over the past twenty years research on leadership has significantly evolved (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009). A conclusion that can be drawn when evaluating most previous leadership models, is that these models have been designed to illustrate hierarchical organization structures, assuming that leadership models should be as hierarchical as organizations are (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007).

At the beginning studies on leadership primary focussed on individual leaders, mostly men in the United States and working for large private sector organizations (Avolio et al., 2009). Long-established leadership models explain leaders' behaviour as leader-follower exchange relationships in order to provide direction, reinforce behaviours, to set goals, support and, or based on "economic cost-benefit assumptions" (Bass, 1995: p.5). However, simply considering an exchange between leader and follower as a simple exchange process is not a valid explanation for the full dynamics of leadership (Avolio, et al., 2009).

Today, individual leaders that represent the entire spectrum of diverse populations from nations around the world, are included in leadership studies. Also, nowadays there is not only focus on the leader but also on the context, followers, supervisors, peers, and culture (Avolio et al., 2009). Based on today's knowledge, leadership can be viewed as an interactive system in which participants can be considered as dynamic and unpredictable, while interacting with each other in complex networks of feedback (Uhl-Bien et al, 2007). Participants can then create adaptable outcomes such as learning, disseminating knowledge, innovation, and increasing adaptation to change (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). This results into a variety of leadership models, such as strategic, relational, dyadic, complex social dynamic and shared leadership (Avolio, 2007, Yukl, 2006). Symbolic leader behaviour such as ideological, visionary, inspirational messaging, emotional, moral, stimulating intellects and attention on individuals is also emphasized in new leadership models (Avolio et al., 2009).

Meanwhile, there is also an increasing awareness of the gap between leadership models that have been designed for the past century and the leadership dynamics that are experienced in today's knowledge-based organizations (Lichtenstein, Uhl-Bien, Marion, Seers, Orton, & Schreiber, 2007).

The unit of analysis in traditional leadership theory is most times the leader, or the leader and his followers, or the leader and his group, and so forth (Avolio et al., 2009). Leadership theory and research of the past decade considerably supports the effectiveness of charismatic and transformational leadership (Strange and Mumford, 2002; Berson, Shamir, Avolio and Popper, 2001; Larwood and Falbe, 1995). Such leadership focusses on how leaders create, communicate, and implement vision, which can be defined as a

highly desirable and vivid future state that motivates followers (Strange and Mumford, 2002; Berson et al., 2001; Larwood and Falbe, 1995).

Evolving from previous works on leadership, theories on charismatic and transformational leadership were most frequently researched (Avolio, 2005; Lowe & Gardner, 2000) to understand processes on how charismatic and transformational leaders have positive influence on attitudes, behaviours, and accomplishments of their followers (Avolio et al., 2009). For example, several studies examined different effective transformational leadership processes, such as followers' identification, commitment, and satisfaction (e.g. Liao & Chuang, 2007; Walumbwa, Avolio, & Zhu, 2008); job characteristics such as identity, autonomy, and significance (e.g. Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006); trust in the leader (e.g. Wang, Law, Hackett, Wang, Chen, 2005); to what extent followers view themselves and their group in terms of efficacy and cohesion (e.g. Schaubroeck, Lam, & Cha, 2007; Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson, 2003; Bono and Judge, 2003), and in terms of results (Avolio et al., 2009). Charismatic leadership theories explain that followers identify themselves with such leaders and their missions. Followers of charismatic leaders feel elevated, and they find importance in to not just transact but to perform beyond base expectations (e.g. Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1985; Conger & Kanungo, 1998). There is a certain number of differences in the fundamental theoretical models on transformational leadership (Rafferty and Griffin, 2004; Bass and Avolio, 1994) and charismatic leadership (Conger and Kanungo, 1998; Shamir, House and Arthur, 1993). According to these models, exemplary leadership alters the expression of a vision that is inspiring and feasible (Strange and Mumford, 2002; Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1996). Current studies on leadership claim that followers of exemplary leaders describe their leaders as visionary and inspirational (Rafferty and Griffin, 2004; Conger, 1999; Bass

and Avolio, 1994). This brings us to visionary leadership. Visionary leadership is demonstrated when top management expresses a clear vision of a future state and designs a system which is appropriate in terms of formal structures, audit systems and incentives (Neilson et al., 2008). Because of its focus on motivating others to pursue a strategic vision, visionary leadership can be distinguished from other leadership styles, such as transactional, transformational, and charismatic leadership (Carton, Murphy & Clark, 2014; Yukl, 2012). Van Knippenberg and Stam (2014) suggest that there is no other leadership style that so directly focuses on these effective aspects of leadership as visionary leadership. In addition, latest empirical research and meta-rational reviews indicate strong effects of visionary leadership at individual-, group-, and organization-levels of analysis (Groves, 2005; Dumdum, Lowe and Avolio, 2002; Waldman, Ramirez, House and Puranam, 2001).

Shipley and Michela (2006) suggest that visionary leadership by top management motivates support for a collective cause. Top management's strategic visions provide guidance and overarching direction for managers charged with the task of implementation (Oswald, Mossholder, & Harris, 1994). In addition, visionary leadership positively effects employee engagement (Moss, 2009) and company performance (de Luque, Washburn, Waldman & House, 2008).

Theoretical concepts suggest that effective leaders use vision as a key technique to inspire followers and make them perform extremely well (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996). Literature on leadership (Carton, Murphy & Clark, 2014; Stam, Lord & van Knippenberg, 2014; Venus, Stam & van Knippenberg, 2013; Griffin, Mason & Parker, 2010) and literature on strategy process (Elenkov, Judge, & Wright, 2005; Baum, Locke, & Kirkpatrick, 1998;

Westley & Mintzberg, 1989) strongly support visionary leadership for its positive effect on strategic commitment.

According to Stam et al. (2004) visionary leadership creates a shared perception of middle management's role in the pursuit of vision and mobilizes middle management to pursue that vision (Stam et al., 2014). However, the workings of interactions between middle management and top management were not singled out (Raes et al., 2007), including the effect of visionary leadership by top management on middle management's strategic commitment. A central question in research on leadership is how an individual in a leadership position can successfully influence others' behaviour and commit them to achieve collective objectives (Yukl, 2002; Bass, 2008). Therefore, when it comes to information on how top management's visionary leadership can create strategic commitment among middle management very little is known. Additional research could contribute to existing theories and literature.

2.4 Strategic alignment

In various management studies strategic alignment is an important concept and refers to consistency or fit (Powell, 1992; Venkatraman and Prescott, 1990; Venkatraman, 1989; Miles and Snow, 1978). In accordance with theories on contingency (Miller and Friesen, 1984), alignment between a company's strategy and its context is important for the company's performance and success (Venkatraman and Prescott, 1990; Venkatraman, 1989). Context is referred to both the company's external environment (Anderson and Zeithaml, 1984; Bourgeois, 1981) and its internal environment (Andrews, 1971). The company's internal environment includes the company's resources and competencies (Andrews, 1971), its structure (Rumelt, 1974; Chandler, 1962) and its administrative systems (Galbraith and Nathanson, 1978).

For effective strategy implementation, it is of high importance that employees' actions are consistent with the company strategy (Van Riel, Berens, & Dijkstra, 2009). This also applies to middle management. The extent to which middle management takes initiatives and deploys actions to implement strategy is referred to as strategically aligned behaviour (Gagnon and Michael, 2003). According to Nutt (1987) strategically aligned behaviour by middle management can be defined as implementation tactics, and to some degree what is referred to as middle manager strategic agency (Mantere, 2008).

Middle management's strategically aligned behaviour can be classified into two categories (Schendel and Hofer, 1979). The first category is interpersonal behaviour and emphasizes on how to ensure that the company strategy is daily taken into account by subordinates while performing their daily work, for instance when communicating on the strategy of the company (Schendel & Hofer, 1979). Behaviour that aims to initiate activities and projects to successfully implement strategy is determined as the second category (Van Riel, Berens, & Dijkstra, 2009).

To achieve alignment, it is important for middle management to be aware, understand and demonstrate positive behaviour towards new strategic goals (van Riel, Berens & Dijkstra, 2009).

Collective understandings of the significance of strategic priorities between top management and middle management can be defined as strategic alignment (Colbert, Kristof-Brown, Bradley, & Barrick, 2008; Raes et al., 2007; Balogun & Johnson, 2004).

It seems important that perspectives and information from top and middle managers are integrated to achieve middle management's strategic alignment (Guth & MacMillan, 1986). However, there is not much information available on how top management exactly

influences and creates alignment between middle management and their daily work (Raes et al., 2007). Also, not much attention has been given to how top management creates alignment between strategy formulation, strategy implementation and middle management's commitment (Raes et al., 2007). Therefore, research on the extent to which top management has influence on strategic alignment among middle management can contribute to existing theories and literature.

2.5 Strategic commitment

Successful execution of strategy is an important precondition for a company's success (Neilson, Martin, & Powers, 2008). From that perspective a company needs strategic committed teams throughout the whole company (Noble, 1999). Strategic commitment can be explained as voluntary collective efforts, collaboration, and support for the company strategy (Dooley, Fryxell & Judge, 2000; Dess, 1987). Strategic commitment includes willingness of employees to go beyond a positive attitude towards strategy and show great efforts in implementing the strategy of the company (Herold, Fedor, Caldwell, & Liu, 2008; Korsgaard, Schweiger, & Sapienza, 1995). Therefore, strategic commitment is the first step in an individual's role performance, since it indicates the extent to which people demonstrate contributory behaviour and perform in a way that supports achievements of the strategic goals of the company (Barton and Ambrosini, 2012). In different terms, the extent to which employees' behaviour is in line with the strategic direction of the company is referred to as strategic commitment. (Gagnon, Janssen and Judd, 2008; Ford, Weissbein and Plamondon, 2003; Noble and Mokwa, 1999). To be specific, there are different work-related focal points, such as role commitment, team commitment, strategy commitment, change commitment, and organizational commitment, to which employees can be committed to (Turner – Parish, Cadwallader and

Busch, 2008; Meyer, Srinivis, Lal and Topolnytsky, 2007; Ford et al., 2003; Herscovitch and Meyer, 2002; Noble and Mowka, 1999; Becker, 1992). These focal points of commitment imply a 'strong drive that directs behaviour' (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001).

A critical question however is how companies can ensure strategic commitment from all employees (Ateş et al., 2018), regardless of what they could be committed to. According to Ateş et al. (2018) the answer is to be found in how middle management interprets strategy in the context of daily operations, how middle management identifies required actions and in how middle management communicates the underlying logic of strategy in a clear manner to their direct reports (Woolridge, Schmid, & Floyd, 2008; Floyd & Woolridge, 1992). In addition, several studies argue that a crucial determinant of successfully implementing strategy depends on middle management's support for strategy (e.g. Rameshesan et al., 2013; Floyd & Woolridge, 1992, 1997; Burgelman, 1983). Therefore, strategic commitment is a precondition for middle managers' behaviour that serves the achievement of strategic objectives. Strategic commitment occurs when a manager understands and is in support of the strategic goals and objectives and the strategic direction of the company (Ford et al., 2003). As a result, it enhances ownership of the strategy among middle management (Noble and Mowka, 1999). In regard to middle management, strategic commitment can also be described as willingness among middle managers to reach the strategic objectives of the company (Ford et al. 2003). It has influence on required behaviour that supports the company strategy (Beer, Eisenstat and Spector, 1990; Frohman and Johnson, 1993; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1997; Noble and Mokwa, 1999).

According to Noble and Mokwa (1999) clarity on the company's strategic might be one the most crucial determinants for middle managers to take effort and reach effective

strategy implementation. Good understanding of the company's strategy influences middle management's commitment to view the strategy as effectively implemented (Kohles, Bligh, & Carsten, 2012). An articulated vision supports managers in their validation of that vision and allows them to compare it with their individual strategy (Fusco, 1997).

Top managers are likely viewed as proximal influencers on middle managers since they are perceived as the principal agents of the organization in communicating necessary information and providing support to employees during organizational change (Wu, Neubert and Yin, 2007). It is therefore important for middle managers to perceive that top management takes effort to facilitate the strategy implementation process (Noble and Mokwa 1999). Such behaviour also has influence on strategic commitment among middle management (Ford et al., 2003). The extent to which middle management perceives top management's support is reciprocal and can be associated with employee engagement and consequently strategy commitment among middle management (Byrne and Hochwarter, 2008).

As was shown by Guth and MacMillan (1986) middle managers with negative or low commitment to the company strategy as formulated by top management can obstruct successful strategy implementation and strategic performance. Therefore, it is a challenge for top managers to get consensus from middle managers to commit to the company strategy and to successfully implement this strategy (Jaros, 2010). There is not much research available on the impact of visionary leadership by top management on middle management's strategic commitment. Therefore, a study that focusses on the relationship between the variables as discussed in the theoretical framework will be deployed to contribute and fill an important research gap.

3. METHOD

This chapter explains which research method was used to investigate and analyse the impact of visionary leadership by top management on strategic commitment among middle management and why this method applies for this research. In addition, this chapter explains in which context the research took place, and how the data collection was carried out.

This research aims to enhance understanding on how top management's visionary leadership can ensure strategic commitment among middle management. The approach of this research is concerned with a holistic interpretation and understanding (Erikson and Kovalainen, 2008) of the impact of top management's visionary leadership on strategic commitment among middle management.

Collection of relevant data and the analysis for this research are sensitive to the social and cultural context (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). Therefore, qualitative research is relevant because it gives opportunity to concentrate on the complexity of visionary leadership and strategic commitment as phenomena in their context (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008).

For qualitative research, case studies are suitable since they give opportunity to explain, describe and explore a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Blumberg, Cooper, & Schindler, 2011). According to Pickard (2013) the purpose of a case study is to provide a complete description of the case and to gain an in-depth understanding. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) explain that a case study ensures interaction between readers and the data as presented. It also offers opportunities to project the results on the

readers' understandings of the organization and draw lessons from it (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

On the impact of top management's visionary leadership on strategic commitment among middle management there is not much research available. Therefore, specifically for this thesis a single case study that focusses on the relationship between the key variables, as discussed in the theoretical framework, can be identified as an appropriate approach. Reasons are that (1) the focus of the study lies on answering 'why' and 'how' questions, (2) the contextual conditions will be covered because they seem to be relevant to the examined phenomenon, and (3) the boundaries between the phenomenon under investigation and context are somewhat vague (Yin, 2003).

The most common criticism of the case study method is that the results are difficult to generalize (Tellis, 1997). However, according to Flyvbjerg (2006) a single case study is a sufficient method for research in social sciences. A single case study is a method that, in comparison to other social science research methodologies, brings forward in-depth knowledge and therefore holds up well (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Therefore, this descriptive and phenomenological single case study can contribute and support further academic research (Flyvbjerg, 2006) on the impact of visionary leadership on middle management's strategic commitment.

The state of prior literature on this research subject is determined to be nascent. This study will be done by combining the reviewed existing theory with in-depth empirical insights that will be gathered through semi structured interviews.

3.1 Empirical context

The empirical evidence of this research is based on an in-depth single case study. For this research, the northern-European region of a large investment company in the hospitality industry will be investigated as the case company. The case company offers an interesting research setting for at least three reasons. First, the company strategy has recently been defined and presented by top management. An employee engagement survey (appendice D) that has recently been conducted demonstrates a positive score on top management's leadership and the relationship between top and middle management. Second, middle management has not been involved in formulating the company strategy, and results of an engagement survey indicate that 66% of middle management finds that top management clearly provides direction for the future. Also, top management is seeking for possibilities to better align and commit middle management to their strategy and strategic goals. Therefore, the company offers a unique opportunity to gain access to confidential data from top and middle management. Due to the author's network within the company, both top and middle management were expected to talk openly about their perceptions of the company strategy, leadership as demonstrated by top management and perceived strategic alignment and strategic commitment among middle management. These perspectives were vital to the design of this case study.

3.2 Method of data collection

To collect data, semi-structured interviews have been conducted. This allows more focus to be obtained than in a completely unstructured interview.

Based on scientific literature, concepts of visionary leadership, strategic commitment and strategic alignment are used as sensitizing concepts or guiding concepts (Boeije, 2014).

The concepts of visionary leadership, strategic commitment and strategic alignment were used to set up the interview protocols (appendices B and C) and were explained during the interviews to ensure a uniform understanding of used concepts, and thus can be made qualitatively measurable.

3.3 Operationalization of variables

This paragraph explains how the key variables are measured in the interview protocols and how the answers as provided by top and middle management are coded. This operationalization aims to support comparisons in collected data.

Visionary leadership by top management

To get an understanding of top management's visionary leadership, top managers are asked to specify their vision of the company, its rationale and how the vision of the company is communicated. Top managers are also asked to describe their relationship with middle management and how they communicate their vision to middle management. Based on their answers, different elements of top management's visionary leadership, that play an important role in strategic commitment among middle management, can be accentuated. Specifically, when a top manager expresses a clear, inspiring, and feasible vision of a future state and when an appropriate system to achieve that vision can be described.

Middle managers are asked to describe the organizational vision and how it is communicated to them. Firstly, this will indicate whether middle management's answers on the vision comply with top management's description and whether they are fully aware of the organizational plans for the future. To determine the effects of top management's vision on strategy, middle managers are asked how they perceive the vision, whether the

formulated vision facilitates them in fulfilling their role within the organization and in its implementation. Middle management's perceptions may give an indication of whether a concrete or an abstract vision is more superior to the other in inspiring them to action and in encouraging them in their functional responsibilities and in implementation of the vision.

Strategic alignment among middle management

Collective understandings of the significance of strategic priorities between top management and middle management can be defined as strategic alignment (Colbert, Kristof-Brown, Bradley, & Barrick, 2008; Raes et al., 2007; Balogun & Johnson, 2004).

To get an understanding of the extent to which middle management has an understanding of the significance of strategic priorities and initiates activities that are consistent with the company strategy, middle managers are asked to describe their function, field of activity in the organization and how it relates to the strategic priorities. They are also asked whether they would consider themselves as an influential person within the organization. Based on the indicated activities of middle management within the company, their degree of involvement can be determined. This information will show whether middle management has a reactive (low involvement) or a proactive role (high involvement) within the organization and the strategy (Mussenbrock, 2009).

Top management is also asked to define the function of middle management in the organization and whether they consider their direct reports as influential persons in the organization.

Strategic commitment among middle management

Strategic commitment can be explained as voluntary collective efforts, collaboration, and support for the company strategy (Dooley, Fryxell & Judge, 2000; Dess, 1987). As successful execution of strategy is an important precondition for a company's success (Neilson, Martin, & Powers, 2008), a company needs strategic committed teams throughout the whole company (Noble, 1999). From this perspective, middle managers are asked to explain to what extent they are willing to go beyond what is expected from them to achieve the strategic goals of the company. They are also asked to describe how they demonstrate their willingness and efforts to go beyond top management's expectations in terms of commitment towards the organization, the company strategy, organizational change and their role.

Top management is asked to explain if and how they perceive that middle management is willing to go beyond a positive attitude towards strategy and show great efforts in implementing the company strategy. In addition, top management is asked to which extent middle management's demonstrates behaviour in terms of commitment towards the organization, the company strategy, organizational change, and their role, in line with the strategic direction.

3.4 Data analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Sonix.ai. Data collection and data analysis constantly alternate, resulting in targeted data collection (Boeije, 2005). To analyse qualitative data, interview results were analysed using Atlas.ti 8 software. While using the Gioia method, various steps have been taken to shape the encoding process. This method identifies first order codes, second order codes (codes and code groups) and aggregated dimensions (Corley, Gioia, & Hamilton, 2012).

Also, the pattern-matching technique which focusses on finding patterns from empirical data to compare them with existing theory has been applied (Yin, 2014).

3.5 Sample

Twelve interviews were conducted among four top managers and eight middle managers within the northern European region of the case company. The four selected top managers are responsible for formulating the strategy within the northern European region of the case company. Selected middle manager are responsible for implementing the strategy of the company and report directly to the selected top managers.

3.6 Ethics

All respondents participated voluntarily. Before the start of each interview, the research project and the rights of participants were explained in the invitation per e-mail (appendice A) and re-confirmed at the beginning of the interviews. All interviews in this study were conducted confidentially and processed anonymously. To avoid traceability of quotes, individual and professional characteristics are left out.

4. RESULTS

The results as presented in this section are based on interviews that have been conducted. Outcomes of these interviews have been coded and classified into the following main categories: vision of the company, strategy of the company, top management's leadership style, the role of middle management, communication from top management, the relationship between top- and middle management, and middle management's strategic commitment. The following paragraphs describe findings and analyses on these categories.

4.1 Abstract vision

When comparing middle managers' answers on the company's vision, both top and middle management describe that the company stands for value creation for the company stakeholders, meaning the financial value of properties.

An analysis of top management's answers on the vision of the company, brings forward a general description of the vision of the company. The quote below illustrates how a top manager expresses his vision of the company.

Interview TM-2

"We would like to be the biggest one and the largest one in Europe and then especially in the combination of being an owner."

Another top manager, as quoted below, expressed that the company vision is not yet clear and needs adjustments. Yet another top manager explained that the company vision is not yet formal and that the northern European vision as presented was just a rough exercise. It is therefore noticeable that top management does not provide corresponding answers when it comes to the vision of the company and results in in lack of clarity on their vision.

Interview TM-1
"Blocking elements have to do with the fact that our vision is not yet very clear."

When comparing middle managers' answers on the company's vision with answers provided by top management, both top and middle management describe that the company stands for value creation, in terms of the financial value of properties, for the company's stakeholders.

> Interview MM-3-1
>
> *"The vision*
>
> *is to grow. I think that this company is looking for making acquisitions growing developing, developing its business by acquiring new business but also by leaving some businesses, to cope with the hotel business as the main function. This is it. Really growing in its business by having new business."*

A general conclusion to be drawn is that middle management perceives a general, abstract, and somewhat vague, vision of the company, especially in how it is explained by top management within the northern European region of the company. Another conclusion to be drawn is that the vision is not well and not fully articulated, probably because top management did not express a clear vision of a future state (Neilson et al., 2008).

> Interview MM-1
>
> *"Only vision to my knowledge is quite broad. Because you can't say you have the highest number. I find it woolly, fluffy, not tangible."*
>
> Interview MM-3
>
> *"Sometimes it's not very, it's not a very concrete message it's sometimes also quite vague."*

4.2 Limited understanding of the strategy

When it comes to strategy of the company, one out of four top managers describes information on the strategy of the company in more details and explains four pillars on

which the strategy of the company is built. The other three top managers described parts of the company strategy. The quote below illustrates how top management gives a general and abstract description of the strategy of the company.

Interview TM-2

"It's all about the asset management cycle where you buy, where you buy a hotel where you maintain it for a period of time but always with the purpose to sell it again and that that is our strategy when it's about let's say the hardware of hotels."

Among middle managers, one out of eight could describe the strategy of the company in details, and the exact four pillars on which the strategy of the company is built.

Interview MM-1

"..making the most of our buildings, making sure that the assets are as good, as they can be, as well for new investors, as well for current investors and also looking at opportunities to extend our portfolio to sell and to buy properties to look at new markets maybe to sell and to buy that's for one strategy. The other one pure technically for me is to look at more energy efficient ways to run a hotel but also to report about the energy efficiency, to look at intelligent buildings, make them intelligent so they can, so actually you will discover problems earlier then they will occur, try to make them, they call it building intelligence, so that's for me another strategic pillar. Another one is to to train and develop our people as well in the head office as well as in the hotels, to run these kind of assets properties hotels if you want to again in the most efficient way possible and the fourth strategic pillar which I think is a fourth one, but that's something I'm not so sure about."

Seven middle managers described a more abstract strategy of the company.

> Interview MM-2-2
>
> *"The strategy of the company is to buy assets and to build their value."*
>
> Interview MM-2-1
>
> *"First of all, the strategy is to expand the properties. To expand the EBITDA. The profit is the first thing I think about. By a few opportunities, not only to have more hotels or more properties. It is also to make, to have a more efficient organization."*

Conclusion to be drawn is that most top- and middle managers describe the strategy of the company in terms of maximizing the value of the company. When discussing the strategy of the company a middle manager expressed that he does not know or understand the strategy enough to contribute. This outcome can be linked to the fact that both top- and middle management explained that middle managers were not involved in formulating the strategy of the company. As quoted below, top managers separately expressed that the strategy might not be well understood and needs to be addressed better and more often. Therefore, conclusion is that the strategy of the company might not be well or fully understood among middle management.

> Interview MM-1
> *"I don't know if I know and understand it enough to contribute to the company."*
>
> Interview TM-1
> *"I am not sure that middle managers currently fully understand the strategy of the company."*

4.3 Different perspectives on top management's leadership style

This paragraph describes how middle managers perceive top management's leadership style and how top management perceives their own leadership style towards middle management.

Middle managers perceive top management's leadership style from two different perspectives. Some middle managers describe top management's leadership style as top down and demanding. For example, one middle manager explained that he perceives pressure and that top management will make sure that you deliver rather sooner than later.

Interview MM-3

"... they make sure that you will do your best to deliver it sooner than later. So it's in a way it's kind of pressure that you feel a kind of a pressure to deliver because they're waiting for your answer."

Interview MM-3-1

"There is a context within we have to work with a top down vision and strategy but within my position I feel there is a lot of autonomy which I appreciate."

Another perspective from middle management on top management's leadership style is that they perceive a collaborative and supportive leadership style. Especially, top managers to whom they directly report are being perceived as inspiring. Middle managers that have worked within the company for several years, explain that they experience a companionship with top management and not so much a top down approach.

Apart from a top down management approach, middle managers also perceive autonomy and experiences support from top management. Answers provided by two top managers on their leadership style support how middle managers perceive their top down approach.

Interview TM-4

"Making sure that you drive them into the right direction and make sure that they are aware of what is supposed to be the priority."

Interview TM-3

"No, I think that I'm demanding with my teams. And I ask a high level of commitment and of performance."

The collaborative and supportive leadership style as described by middle managers corresponds with what two out of four top managers find important when it comes to how they lead middle management.

Conclusion that can be drawn is that top management demonstrates two different types of leadership varying from a top down and demanding approach to a leadership style that emphasizes on creating mutual understandings, trust, and respect.

The collaborative and supportive leadership style as described by middle managers corresponds with what two out of four top managers find important when it comes to how they lead middle management.

Interview TM-2

"...about speaking with each other sharing ideas finding each other in the co working within the discipline but even more important across the disciplines and trying to translate that in concrete actions."

These different perspectives on top management's leadership style indicate that top management does not demonstrate a uniform leadership style which subsequently results in middle management's perception of two different leadership styles that are being demonstrated by top management.

4.4 Weak communication from top management

This section describes how top- and middle management explain how the vision and the strategy of the company have been communicated.

Answers provided by both top- and middle management indicate that communication is one of top management 's weaknesses. Top management explained that communication has not yet been a priority.

Interview TM-1

"I must admit that communication is not one of our strongest points and I think we should invest in becoming better at communication. I also believe that we did not communicate our vision well enough."

Interview TM-2

"we have to improve our communication from a strategic point of view."

Middle managers also expressed that top management's vision is not always clear and requires further explanations. One middle manager expressed that it is hard to commit to the strategy if top management is not able to explain it.

Interview MM-4-1

"AccorInvest is a young company in a dynamic market. Because of that, the vision is very broad and not always very clear. The company vision is not always clear and change squite often. Whenever something is not clear I ask for clarification or confirmation."

Interview MM-1

"It is hard to feel committed to strategy of the company. If they can't explain what the strategy is, it is difficult to commit to the strategy. It is important to understand the strategy."

Conclusion to be drawn is that weak communication from top management prevents middle managers from having a clear understanding of top management's vision and their strategy.

4.5 Middle management is responsible for strategy execution

Middle managers are not involved in formulating the strategy of the company. According to top management, middle management is responsible for executing the strategy. Therefore, middle managers have a crucial role in how they motivate and engage their team to work for the company. Top management perceives middle management as a great inspiration in terms of good practices, ways to improve and to sort out the right direction. The quotes below illustrate these findings.

Interview TM-4

"As far as the middle management is concerned they have been a great inspiration of what sort of good practices, ways forward to improve the organization and to sort out the

> *right direction you can only know when you have good interaction with the middle management. Middle management is more involved in execution of the strategy."*

Middle managers perceive to have influence on top management's decision by providing them with the right information. Middle managers expressed that, other than top management, they know how it works and therefore they are better capable to assess the feasibility of decisions on strategic actions.

Interview MM-4-1

"I am not involved in formulating the company strategy of AccorInvest worldwide. But when it comes to the company strategy in the region I am highly involved. Together with my colleagues in the team we discuss and decide on strategic actions that support an increase of the value of the company or actions that protect our value."

4.6 An open and constructive relationship

Middle management perceives an open and constructive relationship with top management and the freedom to express their views and thoughts Also, middle managers feels trust coming from top management.

Interview MM-4-1

"We have a very open and constructive relationship. I have the freedom to express my thoughts and view on certain aspects."

Top management finds it important to have an open and constructive relationship with middle management and stimulates them to speak up. The quotes below illustrates that top management perceives to have a good relationship with middle management.

Interview TM-1
"I feel as if I have a good relationship with middle management"

4.7 Middle management's drives for strategic commitment

This section describes to what extent middle management feels committed to the strategy of the company and what motivates their commitment.

Related to the strategy of the company, middle management has a reactive role, and therefore low involvement.

The table below shows middle managers answers on questions about their commitment to the strategy of the company.

Respondent	Strategically committed	Reasoning
MM-1	Not at all	Is not sure of understanding the strategy and making the right contributions. Feels committed to the people he works with.
MM-1-1	Fully committed	Highly supports the strategy of the company. Takes part in decisions on strategic action.
MM-2-1	Fully committed	Supports top management and complies with their decisions because of ways of working within his own discipline.
MM-2-2	To a certain extent	Does not fully understand top management's strategic decisions and

		experiences a lack of transparency.
MM-3-1	To a certain extent	Personal drive to grow is reason to feel committed.
MM-4	Fully committed	Experiences mutual norms and values with top management.
MM-4-1	Fully committed	Feels engaged and appreciated and perceives autonomy.
MM-4-2	Fully committed	Perceives to understand why decisions and actions are taken. Feels part of decision making on strategic actions.

According to top management, middle managers generally feel committed to the strategy of the company. They question however to what extent middle management completely understands the strategy, since top management finds that communication on strategy should improve. Top management perceives that middle management is committed because they currently buy the story, because they feel committed to their teams and because of their personal values. The quotes below illustrate these findings.

Interview TM-3

"They are very professional, and they are committed to their teams, so it's a real strength of our managers. And that's why I'm saying that most of the time they are not responsible of the weakness of the communication or the weakness of the leadership of the senior management."

Based on findings related to strategic commitment among middle management, conclusion to be drawn is that there are various reasons for middle management to feel committed to the strategy of the company.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter discusses the research findings as presented in the previous chapter in the light of existing theories. Specifically reflecting on how the aggregated dimensions relate to the established theoretical domain.

According to Neilson et al. (2008) strategy can only be successfully executed when top management demonstrates visionary leadership and influences middle management (Love, Priem, & Lumpkin, 2002; Hambrick, & Mason, 1984; Mintzberg, 1978). However, studies on the impact of visionary leadership on strategic commitment among middle managers are limited. Also, research does not provide much theories and insight on how top management can influence middle managers and create strategic commitment.

This research contributes to understandings on how visionary leadership by top management effects middle management's strategic commitment.

To begin with, findings in this research do not significantly indicate the presence of visionary leadership. According to the results middle management feels committed to the strategy because of various reasons such as their commitment to the people they work with, based on their personal norms and values, and based on personal aspirations. The results in this study thus show that visionary leadership is not a crucial determinant for successful strategy execution and to influence middle management. Therefore, findings do not comply with research as conducted by Neilson et al. (2008), Love et al. (2002), Hambrick, & Mason (1984), and Mintzberg (1978). This knowledge is important for

theory on the impact of visionary leadership on strategic commitment among middle management. Findings provide evidence that drives for middle management's strategic commitment differ from being work-related or related to personal norms and values. Following, these drives for strategic commitment strongly direct middle management's behaviour. However, it is also important to stress that the environment in which this research took place is built on strong financial drives which might not allow or require visionary leadership for successful strategy execution. This leads to the following proposition: ·

The framework of a company influences the extent to which visionary leadership has impact on the strategic commitment among middle management.

Therefore, this study offers an additional approach on the impact of visionary leadership by top management on strategic commitment among middle management and their environment as a moderating effect.

In accordance with research done by Raes et al. (2007) this study shows that top- and middle management try to influence each other when it comes to formulating and implementing strategy. These findings indicate the relevance of the relationship between top- and middle management and the influencing processes that take place when it comes to strategic commitment among middle management. This leads to the following proposition:

The relationship between top- and middle management has a significant moderating effect on strategic commitment among middle management.

5.1 Limitations

When considering the contributions of this study there are limitations to be taken into consideration.

The researched company is an example of a decentralized organization in a strong financially driven environment. For other companies or other environmental characteristics this may not necessarily be the standard. Therefore, an important limitation of the research is the generalizability of the research of the results.

Interviews with a larger number of middle managers within the northern European region of the company would have resulted in more detailed information on how vision, leadership and strategy are perceived, and which elements contribute to middle management's strategic commitment in the company. Further, the role of the researcher in the research process must also be included. The position, length and intensity of the research process and the personal perceptions and experiences of the researcher can lead to a less objective perspective. As a result, there is a risk of bias in the research results. In addition, there is a risk that the participants in the interviews will be influenced by the presence of the researcher. Although the researcher has not collected data to support this possibility, this bias cannot be ruled out.

5.2 Suggestions

Middle management's strategic commitment is influenced by many factors. Therefore, future research could focus on completing the list of aspects that influence middle management's commitment to a company strategy and shed more light on how top management's leadership has its impact on strategic commitment among middle management and in its environments. This may also involve a closer study on

characteristics and skills a top manager needs to possess in the hospitality industry to have impact on strategic commitment among middle management.

As personal norms and values and middle management's personal drives were found to be decisive in the extent to which middle management feels committed to a company's strategy, future studies on strategic commitment among middle management in other industries should in much greater detail explore the impact of both elements and the link with strategic commitment among middle management. As literature on strategic commitment among middle management builds upon literature on visionary leadership, leadership elements from top management and personal drives and aspirations among middle management should be explored extensively to enrich the understanding on how top management's visionary leadership has its impact.

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APPENDICES

Appendice A

Invitation

Dear manager,

As part of my master thesis in Business Administration I am conducting interviews to increase understanding of the impact on visionary leadership on strategic commitment among middle management.

As a manager within AccorInvest you are in an ideal position to give valuable first hand information. From that perspective I kindly would like to invite you for an interview.

The interview takes around 30 minutes and is highly informal. I will simply try to capture your thoughts and perspectives on top management leadership and the extent to which you are committed to the company strategy. Your responses to the questions will be kept confidential. Each interview will be assigned a numerical code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and formulation of findings.

Thank you in advance for your participation and contribution to this research study.

Best regards,

Gracita Linger

Appendice B

Interview protocol top management

Date	
Interviewee	
Position	
Department	
Country	

Organizational function

- What is your function within the company?

- What is the function of middle management?

Vision

- What does this company stand for and what does it aim to achieve?

- What is the company's vision?

- What is the rationale behind this vision?

- How do you communicate this vision communicated?

Middle management

- What is middle management's role with regard to the vision?

- What do you expect from them?

Strategy and middle management

- What is the strategy of the company?

- To what extent do you involve middle management in formulating the strategy of the company?

- To what extent does middle management support the company strategy?

Leadership and the relationship with middle management

- How important do you consider leadership in regard to execution of the company strategy?

- What characterizes your leadership style?

- How do think your leadership supports the strategy and the vision of the organization?

- How would you describe your relationship with middle management?

- What seems to be their attitude towards you?

- What kind of feeling do you have in dealing with them?

- How do you perceive the following elements in your relationship to middle management? Trust, communication, and autonomy.

- Do you consider middle management as an influential force within the company?

Strategic commitment among middle management

- What are blocking elements when it comes to strategic commitment among middle management?

- What are positive elements when it comes to strategic commitment among middle management?

- To what extent are you content with the strategic commitment among middle management?

Appendice C

Interview with middle management

Date	
Interviewee	
Position	
Department	
Country	

Organizational function

- What is your function?

Vision

- What do you consider as to what this company stands for and aims to achieve?

- What is the company's vision?

- How do you perceive the vision?

- How is the vision communicated to you?

- Does the vision give you a useful direction?

- How does the formulated vision facilitate you in fulfilling your role in within the company/developing goals?

- What are positive and negative elements of the vision?

Strategy and commitment

- What is the strategy of the company?

- To what extent where you involved in formulating the strategy of the company?

- To what extent are you in support of the company strategy?

Leadership and the relationship with top management

- How would you describe top management's leadership style?

- What characterizes their leadership style?

- How do you think that top management's leadership supports the strategy and the vision of the company?

- How would you describe your relationship with top management?

- What kind of feeling do you have in dealing with them?

- What seems to be their attitude towards you?

- How do you perceive the following elements in your relationship with top management? Trust, communication, and autonomy.

- Do you consider yourself as an influential person within the company?

Appendice D

Senior Leadership score (66%)

	Engagement	Leadership, Line Manager	Empowerment - Initiatives	Leadership, Senior Managers	Satisfaction	Vision & Strategy
	57%	72%	71%	66%	66%	64%
Distance From						
2018 - Accor Invest	+11	--	--	--	--	--
Northern Europe Top Quartile	-10	-4	-2	-9	-10	0