



Chapter 10

Middle Management and Strategy Execution in a VUCA World: A Case of a Higher Educational Institution

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ABSTRACT

Middle management in organizations execute strategic plans, and often, do not execute as they should because of misinterpretation of the strategic plans, limited knowledge, and complexity of the world. Literature tends to focus on strategy formulation rather than on execution. Few studies have focused on the role of middle management in the execution of strategy in a complex world. This study explores the role of middle management in higher educational institution (HEI) in executing strategic plans in a volatile, unpredictable, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world. A qualitative research approach was employed and interviews conducted with ten middle management staff. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The study recommends that training for HEI middle management is undertaken and vital to implement strategic plans effectively. Recommendations from the study may assist in understanding how middle management execute strategy in the VUCA world in HEIs.

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INTRODUCTION

Tovstiga (2015) states that sense-making brings order to a complex and confusing reality. Confusion arises when there is a misunderstanding in explaining the concept of strategy and the key variables that assist in breaking down organizational execution. During the development of strategic plans, leadership in organizations often introduce new themes that require significant changes in the organizational structure and the behavior of the employees (Hambrick & Lovelace, 2018). The strategic plan outlines the institutional climate and culture, goals, and enablers to inspire greatness in all its stakeholders.

It is problematic when strategic goals are not realized due to the disruptions of the economic world order and environmental changes. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, strategic goals had to be adaptable to the changing and challenging times. Strategic leadership is a synergistic amalgamation of visionary or transformational and managerial or transactional leadership. Maisyura et al. (2022) state that transformational leadership is critical to creating and being proactive with strategic plans that serve as a source of competitive advantage, thus determining organizational success.

Institutions of higher learning mergers were part of the social transformation process that transformed the landscape of the South African education system (Hartvigson & Heshmati, 2023). Further, to fulfill the criteria to compete with institutions of higher learning locally and internationally, that transformation contributes to the internationalization of education.

The strategic plan constructs the present-day strengths of the Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the VUCA environment. It seeks to make further developments as the world changes. It also aims to strengthen the HEI to address internal challenges tactically and proactively seize prospects arising from the external environment. Attitudes (participation by the student representative council) of students towards university policies also impact decision-making regarding procedures and policies in institutions of higher learning.

The strategic plan includes changes in teaching, learning, and operations brought about by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) in the HEI. Leaders in the 21st century—especially during the recent global pandemic—face diverse and intense organizational issues requiring new leadership approaches. While change in organizations and life is generally expected and can be voluntary or in response to external pressures, we operate in environments characterized by increased unpredictability, instability, and ambiguity (Ross & Leonard, 2020). It is hoped “that the challenges of our uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world might be the stepping-stone to more generative ways of knowing and being” (Sell, 2021, p. 245).

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