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# Organizational stress and dilemma management in mid-level industrial executives: An exploratory study



Ulrike Bossmann\*, Beate Ditzen, Jochen Schweitzer

Institut für Medizinische Psychologie, Universitätsklinikum Heidelberg, Bergheimer Straße 20, 69115 Heidelberg, Germany

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of our study is to identify dilemmas experienced by mid-level managers throughout their daily business as well as their resilience strategies to deal with those dilemmas. Based on this information it is planned to develop a dilemma-focused resilience training. The article summarizes analysis of 18 semi-structured interviews that were conducted with mid-level managers from two medium-sized enterprises in Germany. Content analysis revealed 48 categories. We identified organizational dilemmas, aggravating and alleviating factors, and health-promoting strategies to deal with dilemmas. The importance of a constructive way to deal with dilemmas and implications for the aspired resilience training are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

About 20% of the adult working population in the European Union is affected by at least one mental health problem within their lifespan (Marusic, 2004). Absenteeism rates related to mental health problems have increased during the last decade and are predicted by the WHO to rise further (Meyer, Mpairaktari, & Glushanok, 2013).

### 1.1. Models of work-related mental health problems

Based on meta-analyses of longitudinal data (Stansfeld & Candy, 2006; Lohmann-Haislah, 2012) and cross-sectional data from various European countries (Cottini & Lucifora, 2010), there is strong evidence that the psychosocial work environment has an important impact on mental health. The approaches to explaining psychological impairment focus on work-related stressors and on risk factors for work-related mental illness and reduced work ability. They follow three well established psychological models (Schweitzer & Bossmann, 2014).

The job strain model or job demand-control model (Karasek, 1979) states that heavy job demands (especially in risky “high strain” jobs) trigger mental strain if there are not enough resources to deal with them, especially when workers have little individual

control over their working requirements and circumstances (Karasek & Theorell, 1990).

The effort-reward imbalance model (Siegrist, 1996) considers as particularly stressful those working conditions in which workers experience a lack of material or social gratification for their efforts. This model assumes a necessity for a balanced reciprocity of effort and reward in occupational life and that a permanent effort-reward imbalance increases the development of mental disorders.

The consistency theory (Grawe, 2007) ascribes an increasing potential for mental health impairment to the permanent non-fulfillment or violation of the following four basic human needs: the need for attachment; the need for control/orientation; the need for pleasure / avoidance of pain, and the need for self-enhancement.

Predictions by all three theories have been confirmed by research studies. Stansfeld and Candy (2006) showed that psychological health actually decreases in cases of unfavorable working conditions (Stansfeld & Candy, 2006), while other studies have identified physiological indicators of work-related stress (Rösler et al., 2010; Siegrist & Dragano, 2008).

### 1.2. Leadership as a crucial factor for an employee's wellbeing

Different forms of constructive leadership behavior have been shown to have a positive impact on employees' psychological and physiological health, wellbeing, job satisfaction and early retirement (Kuoppala, Lamminpaa, Liira, & Vainio, 2008; Gregersen, Kuhnert, Zimmer, & Nienhaus, 2011; Skakon, Nielsen, Borg, &

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [ulrike.bossmann@med.uni-heidelberg.de](mailto:ulrike.bossmann@med.uni-heidelberg.de) (U. Bossmann).

Guzman, 2010; Wilde, Dunkel, Hinrichs, & Menz, 2009; Nyberg et al., 2009). However, the need to show constructive leadership often produces a particularly stressful additional demand on managers in their working life. For them, well-intentioned suggestions such as “appreciate your employees frequently” or “create a favorable social environment in your team”, although desirable, can become a source of additional, excessive demands (Zwack, Bossmann, & Schweitzer, *accepted*) on top of a daily schedule reportedly liable to more interruptions, disturbances and multitasking than the daily schedules of non-managers (Stilijanow, 2012).

### 1.3. *The particularly challenging situation of mid-level managers in the sandwich*

Mid-level managers face a particular challenge as they are particular required both to be a daily supportive and appreciative leader for their workers and to fulfill the requirements of strategic management under constant time and performance pressure (Stilijanow, 2012). As a link – a “sandwich” – between the two levels (Mintzberg, 1978), managers are at a particularly high risk. Sherman et al. (2012) have shown that leaders holding less powerful positions exhibit higher cortisol levels and more anxiety than leaders holding more powerful positions. Similarly, Pangert and Schüpbach (2011) reported significantly increased scores for emotional exhaustion in managers in lower positions compared to those in higher positions. This difference could be explained by their lower sense of control (Sherman et al., 2012). This is in line with a study by Pangert and Schüpbach (2011), who found differences in the distribution of stressors and resources: the lower the management level, the higher the stressors (such as uncertainty, interruption of work, cognitive dissonance and a lack of latitude) but also the lower the level of resources to cope with them. According to the job demand-control model, the authors argue that although all managers have high-strain jobs, mid-level managers are not provided with the stress-buffering resource of sufficient control over their own worklife (Sherman et al., 2012; Pangert & Schüpbach, 2011). Lundqvist, Reineholm, Gustavsson, and Ekberg (2013) similarly found that higher-level managers have more freedom to deal with work-life balance interactions, for example, which decreases their burn-out scores. Their predominantly strategic tasks make it easier for them to control when they are to be at the workplace and when not. Pangert and Schüpbach (2011) explain that lower level managers have to stick to the rules set by executive managers and cannot or can only marginally influence those rules. Twice as many lower-level managers as higher-level managers reported being unable to follow through on plans that are important to them. At the same time, they are much more directly confronted with the reality of production and the expectations of their staff. Perceived discrepancies between strategic “top-down” plans and “bottom-up” experiences can create cognitive dissonance as a frequent stressor in lower-level managers’ daily working life.

### 1.4. *Systemic perspectives on the challenging situation of mid-level managers: experienced dilemmas and how to cope with them*

Similar situations can be observed in very different organizations. Analyzing this issue from the perspective of systemic organizational theory (Luhmann, 2000; Simon, 2013a), we can detect – irrespective of the industrial sector, the size of enterprise or other characteristics of the companies – the following similarity: mid-level management is confronted with contradictory demands and paradoxical instructions.

Firstly, most managers operate in contexts with many different stakeholders with differing claims, demands and expectations.

There are customers, employees, suppliers, sometimes shareholders, the owners, and the top management. All pursue their diverging interests, and that on the basis of quite divergent logics of action and reasoning within their subsystems (Luhmann, 2000).

Lately, the needs and interests of qualified employees have become increasingly important to companies in developed countries. This is due to demographic change, growing economic competition and the advance of globalization. Companies now also have to meet higher corporate requirements in terms of sustainability and social responsibility.

In order to survive within their enterprise, managers have to take all the relevant environments into consideration (Simon, 2013b). They often interact with two or more different systems that follow different rationalities. Management in this kind of environment has been called “multirational management” (Schedler & Rüegg-Stürm, 2013). Middle managers often sit at the interface between all groups, all of which are placing demands and making contradictory requests. On the one hand, middle managers have to meet ambitious productivity targets. On the other, they also have to consider their employees’ needs, show appreciation for constraints on employees’ performance and lead their co-workers in a way that promotes employee health. Each target may in itself be unambiguous, but targets can clash and call for diametrically opposed courses of action. Ambitious performance targets and profit objectives can be met quickly on a short-term or medium-term basis if all staff members work a lot or work very fast, and if resources are cut and saved. To focus on employee health needs may take time, and may mean slowing down some work processes or communicating with the employees in question on a more regular or more detailed basis. Functional differentiation within an organization often leads to the emergence of contradictory courses of action at the same time, and to considerable tension between conflicting positions. While human resource development may worry about employee stress, a management accounting department may see its primary task as ensuring that costs are kept under control. Research and development may deal with potential issues in the future, while sales and distribution may focus on the most successful current sales markets and on past customer demand. The coexistence of differentiated subsystems designed to achieve contradictory primary goals and working on very different premises within the same organization often exposes the management, and middle managers in particular, to irreconcilable long-term conflicts (Simon, 2013b): employees have to quickly fulfill today’s tasks but be properly trained for tomorrow’s tasks. Profit has to be generated on a short-term and on a long-term basis. Processes have to be compatible with the past *as well as* the future for sustainable and future-oriented development. The list of contradictory requirements goes on and on. A rational approach in terms of simple “true or false” decisions is not feasible in such a paradoxical context. Acting as an interface between different functions and interests, managers are time and time again compelled to decide between different, conflicting values and objectives.

If a manager internalizes the expectations presented to him or her as strict, unalterable rules, to be complied with by all means and at all times, this can quickly lead to a dilemma (Zwack & Pannicke, 2009). A dilemma occurs when a decision has to be made involving at least two opposing and equally positive or equally negative options (Fischer, 2012). Dilemma situations can rapidly trigger intrapsychic and/or interpersonal conflicts. The person who is faced with the dilemma frequently feels trapped and incapable of action (Schmid & Jäger, 1986). The multitude of contradictory demands that a manager has to face cannot be solved by rational means alone.

Common reactions to dilemmas are denial, fighting, resignation and despair in that order (Schmid & Jäger, 1986). Many managers

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