

Causes and Effects of Strategic Role Conflict in Middle Management

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Abstract

Middle management plays a crucial role in organizations by connecting top-level strategy with operational execution. However, middle managers often experience strategic role conflict due to competing expectations from senior leadership and subordinates. This paper examines the major causes and effects of strategic role conflict in middle management. The study highlights structural, communication, leadership, and organizational culture-related factors that create conflict. It also analyzes the psychological, performance-related, and organizational consequences of such conflicts. The findings suggest that unclear role expectations, rapid organizational change, pressure for performance, and lack of strategic clarity are key causes. The effects include stress, reduced job satisfaction, decision-making delays, decreased team performance, and high turnover intention. The paper concludes that organizations must adopt clear communication systems, defined responsibilities, supportive leadership practices, and structured performance evaluation mechanisms to reduce strategic role conflict and enhance organizational effectiveness.

Keywords: Strategic Role Conflict, Middle Management, Organizational Behavior, Role Ambiguity, Leadership Pressure, Decision-Making, Organizational Performance, Work Stress

Introduction:

In modern organizations, middle management holds a strategically important position. Middle managers act as a bridge between top management and operational employees. They are responsible for translating strategic goals into practical actions while simultaneously managing teams and day-to-day operations. Because of this dual responsibility, middle managers frequently face strategic role conflict.

Strategic role conflict occurs when middle managers experience incompatible expectations related to their strategic and operational responsibilities. On one hand, top management expects them to implement organizational strategies, meet financial targets, and drive innovation. On the other hand, employees expect support, flexibility, fairness, and practical guidance. When these expectations clash, managers experience tension and confusion regarding priorities.

The increasing complexity of business environments has intensified this issue. Global competition, technological changes, digital transformation, performance-based culture, and continuous restructuring have increased the pressure on middle managers. They are required to manage change initiatives while maintaining team morale and operational efficiency. As a result, role boundaries become unclear, and strategic expectations often conflict with operational realities.

Middle managers are also involved in decision-making processes. However, in many organizations, they are held accountable for results without being given full authority to make strategic decisions. This imbalance between responsibility and authority further increases role conflict. Additionally, inconsistent communication from top leadership, frequent policy changes, and unrealistic performance targets contribute to stress and dissatisfaction.

Strategic role conflict does not only affect individual managers but also impacts organizational performance. When managers experience confusion or stress, it can lead to poor decision-making, delayed project execution, reduced employee motivation, and increased turnover. Over time, this may weaken organizational stability and strategic alignment.

Understanding the causes and effects of strategic role conflict is therefore essential. By identifying the root factors, organizations can design better leadership models, clearer reporting systems, and supportive work environments. This paper aims to examine:

1. The primary causes of strategic role conflict in middle management.
2. The psychological and organizational effects of this conflict.

3. Practical strategies to minimize role conflict and improve effectiveness.

In the following sections, the paper will analyze structural, behavioral, and environmental causes of strategic role conflict and discuss how these conflicts influence both individuals and organizational outcomes.

Review of literature:

The concept of strategic role conflict in middle management is rooted in role theory, organizational behavior, and strategic management literature. Several scholars have contributed significantly to understanding role conflict, ambiguity, managerial functions, and strategic influence.

Kahn et al. (1964), in their seminal work *Organizational Stress: Studies in Role Conflict and Ambiguity*, laid the foundation for understanding role conflict and role ambiguity in organizations. They explained that role conflict occurs when individuals face incompatible expectations from different sources, while role ambiguity arises when expectations are unclear. Their study emphasized that such conditions lead to psychological strain, reduced job satisfaction, and lower organizational effectiveness. This work provides a theoretical base for understanding the stress experienced by middle managers when they face conflicting strategic and operational demands.

Similarly, Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) developed measurement scales for role conflict and role ambiguity, which became widely used in organizational research. Their study confirmed that both role conflict and ambiguity negatively affect job satisfaction and performance. Their findings are highly relevant to middle management because managers often operate in complex environments where expectations from senior leadership and subordinates overlap and conflict.

Biddle (1986) expanded role theory by examining its developments and applications across sociology and organizational settings. He highlighted that roles are socially defined and influenced by expectations, norms, and organizational structure. His review suggests that role conflict is not only an individual issue but also a structural and systemic problem. This perspective supports the argument that strategic role conflict among middle managers is shaped by organizational design and leadership systems.

Katz and Kahn (1978), in *The Social Psychology of Organizations*, described organizations as open systems where roles are interconnected. They argued that unclear communication and poor coordination between hierarchical levels create tension and inefficiency. Their systems theory approach explains how middle managers become central actors in maintaining balance between strategy and operations. When this balance is disturbed, role stress increases.

Mintzberg (1973), in *The Nature of Managerial Work*, analyzed managerial roles in detail. He identified interpersonal, informational, and decisional roles performed by managers. His work showed that managers constantly switch between multiple responsibilities, often under time pressure. This complexity naturally increases the chances of conflict, especially in middle management positions where both strategic and operational roles coexist.

Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) shifted the focus to the strategic role of middle managers. Their research demonstrated that middle managers play an active role in strategy formation and implementation, not just execution. They identified different types of strategic involvement and showed that middle management participation varies depending on organizational strategy. This study emphasized the importance of involving middle managers in strategic decisions to improve effectiveness.

Further expanding this perspective, Floyd and Wooldridge (1997) examined the relationship between middle management strategic influence and organizational performance. Their findings revealed that organizations benefit when middle managers actively contribute to strategy. However, they also noted that limited autonomy and unclear strategic direction can reduce their effectiveness. This supports the argument that lack of authority and conflicting expectations create strategic role conflict.



Tushman and O'Reilly (1996) introduced the concept of ambidextrous organizations, which must balance evolutionary (incremental) and revolutionary (transformational) change. They argued that managers at different levels must manage both stability and innovation simultaneously. For middle managers, this dual responsibility can create tension, as they are expected to maintain operational efficiency while also supporting innovation and change initiatives. This dual demand is a major source of strategic role conflict.

Wooldridge, Schmid, and Floyd (2008) provided a comprehensive review of middle management involvement in the strategy process. They synthesized earlier research and highlighted that middle managers influence strategy through upward, downward, and lateral communication. However, they also pointed out that unclear strategic priorities and organizational restructuring can increase role stress. Their study emphasized the need for better alignment between strategic planning and managerial roles.

Overall, the literature indicates that strategic role conflict in middle management is influenced by role theory, organizational structure, leadership style, and strategic complexity. Early studies focused on role conflict and stress, while later research emphasized the strategic importance of middle managers. However, there remains a gap in fully integrating these perspectives to understand how strategic expectations specifically create conflict and affect performance.

1. Strategic Role Conflict

Strategic role conflict refers to a situation where middle managers face incompatible expectations related to their strategic responsibilities. In organizations, middle managers are expected to implement long-term strategies developed by top management while simultaneously ensuring smooth daily operations. When strategic goals such as cost reduction, innovation, or restructuring conflict with operational realities like limited resources or employee resistance, managers experience role conflict.

This conflict often arises because middle managers are positioned between two powerful groups: senior executives and frontline employees. Top management may demand strict performance targets, policy implementation, and rapid change. At the same time, employees may expect emotional support, fairness, flexibility, and practical solutions. When these expectations are inconsistent or contradictory, the manager feels tension.

Strategic role conflict can also occur when managers are responsible for delivering results without having enough authority or decision-making power. This mismatch between responsibility and control increases frustration and confusion. Over time, unresolved strategic role conflict may reduce managerial effectiveness and weaken organizational alignment.

2. Middle Management

Middle management forms the backbone of organizational structure. These managers operate between top-level executives and lower-level supervisors or employees. Their main responsibility is to translate strategic objectives into actionable plans and ensure their execution.

Middle managers perform multiple roles:

- Strategy implementation
- Resource allocation
- Team leadership and supervision
- Performance monitoring
- Communication between levels

Because of this dual role strategic and operational they often face competing pressures. They must support organizational goals while maintaining employee motivation. They are accountable for performance but may not always participate in strategic planning. This position makes them highly vulnerable to stress and role conflict.

In today's competitive and technology-driven environment, middle managers also manage change, innovation projects, and digital transformation initiatives. Their role has become more



complex, increasing the possibility of conflict and ambiguity.

3. Organizational Behavior

Organizational behavior studies how individuals and groups behave within an organization. Strategic role conflict is closely connected to organizational behavior because it influences attitudes, motivation, communication, and performance.

When managers experience role conflict, it affects their behavior in several ways:

- Reduced motivation
- Emotional exhaustion
- Communication breakdown
- Decreased trust in leadership

Organizational culture also plays a major role. In organizations with unclear communication systems, rigid hierarchies, or high-performance pressure, role conflict is more common. Supportive cultures that encourage collaboration and open discussion can reduce the negative impact of conflict.

Understanding organizational behavior helps organizations design better systems that minimize stress and improve teamwork.

4. Role Ambiguity

Role ambiguity occurs when managers do not clearly understand their responsibilities, authority, or performance expectations. It is one of the major causes of strategic role conflict. When job descriptions are unclear or frequently changing, middle managers may struggle to prioritize tasks. For example:

- Should they focus more on achieving financial targets or improving employee satisfaction?
- Should they strictly enforce policies or adapt them to local needs?

Unclear reporting structures and inconsistent instructions from senior leaders increase confusion. Rapid organizational restructuring, mergers, and digital transformation can further intensify ambiguity.

Role ambiguity leads to anxiety, lower confidence, and hesitation in decision-making. When managers are unsure about expectations, they may delay actions or avoid taking responsibility, which ultimately affects organizational performance.

5. Leadership Pressure

Leadership pressure refers to the stress and demands placed on middle managers by senior executives. Top management often sets ambitious goals related to profitability, growth, innovation, and efficiency. While these goals are important for competitiveness, unrealistic targets can create excessive pressure.

Middle managers are frequently evaluated based on measurable performance indicators. They may be expected to:

- Reduce costs
- Increase productivity
- Manage change
- Maintain employee satisfaction

Balancing all these expectations can be difficult. When leaders fail to provide adequate support, resources, or clear direction, managers feel isolated and overburdened.

Leadership style also influences role conflict. Authoritarian or highly centralized leadership can limit managerial autonomy, while participative leadership can reduce stress by involving middle managers in strategic discussions.

6. Decision-Making

Decision-making is a core function of middle management. However, strategic role conflict often complicates this process. Managers must make decisions that satisfy both top management expectations and employee needs.

When authority is limited but accountability is high, decision-making becomes stressful. Managers may fear criticism from senior leaders while also worrying about employee



reactions. This creates hesitation and delays.

Conflicting priorities such as cost control versus quality improvement make decisions more complex. In uncertain environments, managers may lack sufficient information, further increasing stress.

Effective decision-making requires:

- Clear authority
- Access to accurate information
- Support from leadership
- Transparent communication

Without these factors, strategic role conflict can weaken managerial confidence and reduce the quality of decisions.

7. Organizational Performance

Strategic role conflict directly affects organizational performance. When middle managers experience stress, confusion, or dissatisfaction, it influences team productivity and overall efficiency.

Some major performance impacts include:

- Reduced employee engagement
- Delays in project execution
- Lower innovation levels
- Increased turnover
- Poor communication across departments

Middle managers act as a link between strategy and execution. If they struggle with role conflict, strategic plans may not be effectively implemented. Over time, this misalignment can reduce competitiveness and profitability.

Organizations that actively address role conflict through clear communication, training, and supportive leadership often experience better performance outcomes.

8. Work Stress

Work stress is one of the most significant consequences of strategic role conflict. Continuous pressure from both top management and employees can lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout.

Common symptoms of work stress among middle managers include:

- Anxiety and frustration
- Reduced job satisfaction
- Sleep disturbances
- Lack of motivation
- Decreased productivity

Long-term stress may lead to absenteeism or resignation. It can also affect physical and mental health.

Organizations must adopt stress management strategies such as:

- Clear role definitions
- Leadership support
- Work-life balance policies
- Counseling and training programs
- Realistic performance expectations

Reducing work stress not only improves individual well-being but also enhances overall organizational stability.

Overall conclusion:

Strategic role conflict in middle management is a critical organizational issue that arises from competing expectations, unclear responsibilities, leadership pressure, and complex decision-making environments. Middle managers occupy a unique and sensitive position within the organizational structure, acting as a bridge between strategic planning and operational

execution. Because of this dual responsibility, they are highly exposed to conflicting demands from top management and frontline employees.

The study highlights that role ambiguity, limited authority, inconsistent communication, and high-performance expectations are the primary causes of strategic role conflict. These factors not only create confusion but also increase psychological pressure on managers. As a result, middle managers may experience work stress, reduced job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion, and difficulty in making effective decisions.

The effects of strategic role conflict extend beyond individual managers. When middle managers struggle with conflicting expectations, organizational performance can suffer. Delays in implementation, reduced team motivation, communication breakdown, and increased turnover are common outcomes. Since middle managers play a key role in translating strategy into action, unresolved role conflict can weaken strategic alignment and reduce overall organizational effectiveness.

Therefore, organizations must proactively address this issue. Clear role definitions, balanced authority and responsibility, participative leadership styles, transparent communication systems, and realistic performance targets are essential for minimizing strategic role conflict. Providing leadership training and stress management support can further strengthen managerial resilience.

In conclusion, reducing strategic role conflict is not only beneficial for middle managers but also essential for improving organizational stability, performance, and long-term sustainability. When middle managers are supported and empowered, they can effectively contribute to strategic success and organizational growth.

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