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Between the millstones: A narrative account of the vulnerability of middle managers' storying

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to illuminate our understanding of the lives of middle managers by considering the special pressures on them to tell stories about their organization that make sense to three different audiences; their superiors, their subordinates and themselves. Each of those audiences will demand to hear a convincing account, but the senior audience may trample unaware on middle managers' stories, the junior audience may view them with scepticism or hostility, and the self audience may be fearful of losing the plot. Illustrated by four middle management storytelling situations, the article offers a narrative understanding of the peculiar loneliness, precariousness and vulnerability that characterize middle management, and suggests why these characteristics may be debilitating for middle management practice.

KEYWORDS

middle management ■ narrative ■ storytelling ■ vulnerability

Introduction

This article seeks to illuminate our understanding of the lives of middle managers by taking seriously a narrative view of their experience. By this I mean that, rather than consider life as if it were led objectively from outside the person, it considers the implications of understanding the person as both the teller and the object of stories – as *homo narrans narratur* (Christie &

Orton, 1988). We live by story (Hardy, 1968). We position ourselves and others by stories (Davies & Harré, 1990). We live, move and have our being, marinated in our own stories.

We create stories about ourselves and our situation, and we then proceed to live out some of them. Some of the stories we create, however, are contested, denied or simply ignored by others. We are on the verge of living out a story which features a major victory, a pinnacle to our achievements, or a rescue of some deserving cause, when someone else shows total disdain for our narrative of our lives by walking roughshod over the story that we are creating. This is especially the experience of the middle manager; the person who is expected to be able to show some authority over others, while still being seen as relatively unimportant by the senior management.

Middle managers are expected to develop a narrative about what they are doing. As managers, they are expected to weave a narrative for those who work under them to believe in, and to be able to give a coherent narrative account of their performance to their superiors. They are not in the position of serfs, expected to be purely an item within the narrative of their master or mistress. Nor are they in the position of senior managers, whose understanding of the world and whose stories about it are relatively impregnable. They are expected to develop a story of their part of the organization for their staff, but that story may be destroyed by senior management without care or apology.

This article focuses on the processes of constructing one's life as a story ('storying') rather than on stories, and analyses some examples of managers whose storying has been affected by their seniors and their juniors. In some cases, there are accounts from the seniors too, often totally unaware of the devastating effect they have had on the storied lives of their middle managers. We see the precariousness of creating a story and inviting others to join you in living it out, when it is so vulnerable to the actions of others who may have no concept of the narrative effort that has gone into it. Middle managers are frequently expected to make narrative sense of situations, with this sense then being publicly discredited by their seniors. This article explores the personal tensions involved in making precarious sense, including the anxiety felt by some managers that they are putting their juniors and peers at risk by inviting them to believe their story. The pressure on middle managers comes from both sides; their subordinates are often as demanding that they offer a story as are their superiors. Middle managers suffer the double ignominy of having to create a sensible story to protect those who work for them from meaninglessness, and then trying to protect those same people again when the sensible story is suddenly turned into nonsense by their own managers.

Meanwhile, the superiors often express puzzlement and disappointment that middle managers have not 'found their voice', 'been proactive', 'done

something with their time', 'got off their backside', or in some other way done more to develop and live their own story. They often seem to be quite unaware of the ways in which they undermine their subordinates' storytelling, and the article concludes with some observations on this.

Living by story

We lead storied lives; we are continuously producing storied versions of what is happening in our lives, as well as revising the way that we tell the stories of earlier parts of our lives. We also spend time plotting and imagining the next chapter of our lives As Hardy (1968) put it:

We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative.

(p. 5)

Stories are narratives but with a sense of plot (Gabriel, forthcoming). The plot may be of many different kinds (Fryc, summarized in Hart, 1994), but essentially the plot is how the person makes sense of the story in which they are placing themselves. We make sense of our working and managing lives by emplotting ourselves in a story (Linde, 1993).

The narrative and storytelling tradition in research on people and organizations has been implicit for a long time, for example, in the use of case study research, where it was taken that the unit of analysis was the 'case' or story, which carried its sense as a narrative whole. The sense that human experience cannot be understood if too severely fragmented has been influential for quite a while (Reason & Rowan, 1981). Often this has meant not taking too individualistic a view of organizations, or not seeking to impose discrete variables on the rich and complicated texture of a situation. It may also be applied to the emergence of narrative research as a way of viewing the storytelling nature of human experience without insisting on breaking the stories up, which would relieve the experience of much of its meaning.

The narrative tradition in research grew up in the belief that storytelling and experience are not separable. Experience is only made available, through memory, when it is turned into a story.

It is, in short, only when haphazard happenings are transformed into story, and thus made *memorable* over time, that we become full agents of our history.

(Kearney, 2002: 3, emphasis in original)

MacIntyre (1981) argues that we can only understand societies and people by the stories that they transmit. 'It is through hearing stories . . . that children learn, or mislearn, both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are' (MacIntyre, 1981: 54). Sarbin (1986) takes this forward to argue that narrative is the organizing principle for human action, as well as being the way that the narrator understands themselves. The history of narrative studies is the subject of a fine summary by Bruner (2002: 109–12).

In this article I take a narrative approach to understanding people in organizations, following a tradition in which early influential players were Boje (1991) and Gabriel (1991). Since then there have been major contributions to the theorizing of storytelling in organizations (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; Czarniawska, 1997; Gabriel, 2000) and to the methodology of narrative analysis (Boje, 2001; Czarniawska, 1998; Josselson & Lieblich, 1999; McKee, 1998). The presentation and analysis of narrative data is always an artistic endeavour as much as a scientific one (Grint, 2000). In this article, I have selected four stories. In each case I have known several participants who *could* have told stories about the events covered. In common with all qualitative approaches to research, I have not had room to relay to the reader everything that I have heard. I have presented the stories as vignettes, and done my best to piece together, in each case from many hours of listening to participants in the situation, a version of the story which would be fair and recognizable to many of those involved, and which, like many stories, reflects the view of more than one participant. This means that not all my processes of summary and analysis are visible to the reader, and no doubt there are aspects of those stories that I have edited to convey a realistic impression of the stories that I heard (Watson, 2000). My claim for the stories is that they have 'narrative truth' (Bruner, 1990), described by Spence (1984) as the truth that, though it might be only a screen memory or even a fiction, was still close enough to the real thing to start a reconstructive process going. The stories presented are designed to evoke for the reader, as closely as possible, the events and stories experienced by participants and told to the author.

Our stories of our lives are sense-making devices (Weick, 1995), but our relationship with our stories is less under our control and less utilitarian on our part than the 'sense-making' tag might suggest. There is always a tingle of uncertainty, which gives spice to our storied lives, an aleatoric element. The stories that we believe in are not completely plastic. As well as developing stories to understand what is happening to us, we make things happen to us and perceive events in particular ways in order to give a

satisfying, interesting or convincing development to the plot that we are living out.

With us crafting and developing the stories of our lives, it will be very frustrating if this work is destroyed as a result of either active intervention or carelessness by others. This article argues that this is the frequent experience of the middle manager. This is not the person at the bottom of the pile, at the command of all, visibly vulnerable by all. Nor is he or she at the top, the apex of power in the organization. The middle manager is seen by those below as privileged and powerful, and by those above as an apprentice, a possible future competitor or ally, but currently expendable. This article focuses on the particular difficulties of making sense through life stories for those occupying this middle role.

Some of the recent interest in storytelling has been focused on the stories that we tell other people. We often present our actions to others in a storied form. For example, we tell them a story about what has been happening around us which at least justifies and possibly heroizes us; alternatively, if we are feeling bad about ourselves, we may take the opportunity to tell a story which demonizes, marginalizes or even ridicules us (Bruner, 1990). Some of the stories that we tell we see as epitomizing us ('do you know what happened – it's typical of me . . .'); these are often especially interesting for those who work with us, as they learn directly from us about who we wish to be taken to be (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001).

However, we should not lose sight of the other audience, the one within, our selves. The fiercest critic and the most avid listener hears all our stories. We are aware of the inconsistencies, the glosses, the moments of laziness or dissimulation when a story receives particularly heavy editing. We are the audience who most hopes for coherence in the stories told. Linde (1993) suggested that such coherence can only be achieved when there are inconsistent stories being told. We are all too well practised in hearing inconsistent stories emerging from our own mouths to others, and in justifying this to ourselves. But this does not mean that we do not care about these inconsistencies. Far from it; times come when we see these stories as having gone too far, when we feel either guilty or confused about the sheer variability in our storying. Conscience tells us when we have overstretched ourselves in a story, either because it is too fanciful, too flattering to ourselves, or simply too untrue.

I would suggest that the most crucial of our audiences is this internal one. When we lose the confidence of this audience, we have lost our souls. We can explain to ourselves our spin, diplomacy, presentation skills, importance of the ends or whatever when they are directed at others, but we are much less tolerant when we sense that we are deceiving ourselves. Some of

the most pathetic figures in the public gaze are the ones who have visibly deceived themselves. For example, the novelist Jeffrey Archer span himself a web of fantasy that gradually resembled one of the plots of the novels through which he made his living. The public reaction when he was found to have committed fraud on a large scale was sympathy for his family, and horror that someone could lose their sense of the reality of their own story so thoroughly, even someone who was paid to fantasize. What had become of his inner voice (Stein, 1998)?

This shows us why we are quite right to care about, and indeed care for, our stories. If we live by and through narrative, and if stories are the means by which we make sense, then we need to take them seriously. They are not merely for entertainment. They are the meaning of our life. While some see the meaning of life as the extent to which we manage to write ourselves into the stories of others (Edwards, 2000), I would suggest that the meaningfulness of life is what we manage to read about ourselves in our own stories. If we find that we cannot see ourselves there we develop a sense of self disgust. We are also at risk of losing ourselves (Russell, 2002). We have every reason to care strongly about our stories and about how we emplot ourselves. We get angry when we hear a story which we see as important to our sense of our selves being told by someone else as if it were part of them rather than us. Academics are always sensitive about issues of plagiarism, but we are all even more anxious about the plagiarizing or adaptation of our life stories, when we hear someone else appropriate what we see as part of our own story. That is theft. It is also quite a common experience for the middle manager.

The vulnerability of the middle manager's story

The argument so far suggests something of the vulnerability of our stories of our selves. This most delicate of human products is quite easily damaged. Good stories take risks, for example, by taking the listener further than they were expecting to go. They are a complicated balance between the excessively confessional and the over-distant, between the boring and the incredible, between the blandly inoffensive and the embarrassing. They are vulnerable to sabotage. For example, most stories can be severely threatened by a listener saying that they have heard them before, particularly if the story is being presented as original, and as being the personal experience of the teller. When people are caught in the act of passing off a second-hand story as new and personal, they are usually embarrassed. Equally, stories are vulnerable to interruption, especially by other stories. If a story

is interrupted, the implication is that it was not a very good story, and the teller has lost their audience. It is very hard to resume a story when someone else has interpolated one of their own.

In organizations, stories often fail because the characters are not regarded as credible. Stories are told about senior managers, but will only be believed if the characterization of the senior manager is believable to the listeners. Stories do not stand or fall alone, however. They are often seen as part of a larger picture. The storyteller who is found out once with an unbelievable, plagiarized or improbably characterized story may well find difficulty in being believed the next time too.

This applies equally to people developing their life stories. Sustaining a belief that we are living a truthful and coherent story for ourselves is difficult. If we once lose the trust of our audience it is difficult to win it back, even if the loss of trust was caused by something said by someone over whom we have no control, such as a senior manager.

The middle manager's stories are vulnerable to subordinates. Mocking the aspirations and apparent pretensions of those in authority is always popular, and it is particularly easy to do to middle managers. We do not usually want to see our chief executive as utterly incompetent, because it puts us at risk too. We are likely to be more comfortable being dismissive about figures who, while still in authority over us, have less potential to damage our long-term prospects.

Middle managers are ideally placed to have their stories rubbished by those under their command. Middle managers are facing both ways, having to put together a convincing story about what they are doing for the benefit of their seniors and also an (often conflicting) story for their juniors. These stories leak between the two audiences, because they are told in places where part of the other audience may hear them being told. You cannot guarantee that what you tell the senior management team will not be relayed back to those who work for you. If it is, they will scrutinize it for inconsistencies and also for clues about what wider games you may be playing.

Middle managers' storytelling is especially vulnerable to subordinates because many of them may not wish to be middle managers for life. They are expected to tell stories in such a way as to make a good impression for the next promotions round. Their accounts of themselves and their worlds may be scrutinized for signs of ambition, and they will be mocked for this ambition. The middle manager's experience of practising to become a senior manager by modelling the behaviour of the boss will often be more visible to his or her juniors than to self. In the following quotation a middle manager is likened to a British television impressionist:

You should have seen him – he looked just like Chell (the MD); he stood the same way, he even had a bit of a Midlands twang like Chell's, and when he told us about how we were going to get into the market before the Italians I thought – 'who does he think he is – Rory Bremner?'

The delight in seeing the ambitious get their comeuppance is quite even handed. It is not reserved for either the young upstart or the old fool. All middle managers can expect attempts to undermine them such as the one above. It makes it that much more difficult to engage in storytelling if you know that your audience will be picking over the style as well as the content of your stories. At the same time, as we will see later, the subordinates expect and demand that the middle manager has stories to tell them.

The middle manager is often part of an organizational pyramid, with colleagues who will compete for promotion. These colleagues may be rather like a group of friends, but the friendship is somewhat barbed. They will certainly be competing for something; if not for promotion, then probably for resources. They see themselves as being on view to their superiors, and imagine that relative judgements about them are being made. They may have to collaborate with peers who they feel will happily tell destructive stories about them.

The middle manager sees himself or herself as in transition, and this makes it more difficult for stories to settle down. Identity is temporary. The storytelling from the floor, with its deflating of power and hierarchies, has not been completely left behind, and middle managers will expect each other to engage in this. At the same time, they need to rehearse the storytelling of the powerful. They are each other's only audience for such rehearsal, and the competition between them makes this an unsafe audience.

The great peril for middle managers in the face of their seniors is that their stories do not matter very much. Something that is regarded with the utmost seriousness by a middle manager may be treated quite dismissively by his or her boss. The project to which the middle manager gives two years of their working life, putting in long hours and convincing their staff to work at their hardest and give the best of themselves is suddenly dismissed because of internal political needs in the company.

Andy's story

The Director of Corporate Communications in the UK head office of a US-based multinational wondered why his middle managers seemed so bored. He believed that they were currently an under-used resource

from the point of view of the company, as well as being disaffected and potentially lost to the company during their time in middle management roles. He wanted to think about how he could build up what they do, and encourage them to take more responsibility. He was puzzled by the success of schemes to develop senior managers to be more entrepreneurial and active, compared with the seeming failure of all attempts to build the confidence and competence of middle managers in any similar way.

I found a possible explanation as I left his office. By the main door into the office building I happened upon Andy, a former student of mine. 'How are you doing, Andy?' 'I've been better – I'm being made redundant on Friday'. 'Why's that then?'. 'Well, the European operations haven't been doing so well, and so they have got to show Head Office in the US that they are taking the situation seriously. So we middle managers and our projects are used as sacrificial lambs. . . . It's not the job as such that's the issue; there are plenty of those around, and frankly I could do with a rest for a few weeks anyhow. But I have been building something up for the last two years, and now suddenly it is all lost, not because there was anything wrong with it, but just so they can be seen to be responding to problems in other parts of the company. And they'll never get it back; once the team is gone, someone would have to start from scratch to make it happen again.'

There is something like being trampled by an elephant about the ways in which top managers ignore their middle managers' storytelling. It is not deliberately malicious, it is just that the view that the middle manager had was of something too small for the boss to notice it. So in Andy's story, a (relatively) cheap sacrifice was needed. That Andy had seen this project as such a major story in his life and given so much to creating it was neither here nor there. That the company did in fact have to recreate the project later, having lost all the skills to make it work and all the learning from the first two years of it meant that Andy was right in thinking that their sacrifice was not cheap, but they had not believed him when he said it; after all, as the project manager he would say that, wouldn't he? Meanwhile, Andy has to find a way of telling the story of what is happening to the members of his project group, and to decide whether to protect them from his own view about the fundamental carelessness of the company.

As stated earlier, the most critical of the audiences for our stories is the self of the storyteller. Stephen's story illustrates this.

Stephen's story

Stephen was quite a senior middle manager, running a department which contributed 12 per cent of the revenue of his organization. He remains a middle manager, though, with several senior ranks above him in the organization. He had advertised a job for someone at the next level down from him. One of the candidates had been Stephen's first choice, but was rejected by two of the more senior members of the appointing panel on the grounds that, while he had a lot to offer, he was not perfectly fitted for that particular role. Soon after, another manager at the level below resigned, and Stephen tried to persuade his seniors to let him appoint the previous candidate, who was much better suited to the role that was now vacant. Though the senior members of the interviewing panel agreed that the candidate was thoroughly suitable for this role, the appointment was refused on several different grounds, each of which Stephen could quite easily refute. The answer was 'no', and Stephen concluded that any arguments he could produce to make the appointment would not be heard. The senior managers had the right simply to refuse to listen to his story.

Stephen was embarrassed at being so totally discounted by his seniors. He was embarrassed in front of the senior managers, by whom he felt totally belittled. He was embarrassed in front of the candidate, to whom he could give no account of why he was being rejected. He was embarrassed in front of his subordinates, who needed that new manager in post in order to function well. He had no reasonable story he could tell them as to why he had not been allowed to make the appointment, because he simply did not know. He was painfully aware that the event diminished his power and authority, and that he could find no way of telling a story about it which preserved his position. It made it more difficult for him to develop encouraging stories to persuade other people to apply for jobs in his organization. He felt a significant loss of confidence in his own ability and position as a manager; how could anyone who called themselves a manager be so unable to get themselves heard by their senior?

The feeling was of impotent rage. Stephen was unable to do what he thought needed to be done because of the intervention of senior managers who do not bother to give a reason; the response he has been given is disdainful. The options before Stephen are to acknowledge to his staff that he has been over-ridden for no stated reason, to say nothing, or to appear to support the decision. If he tells his staff what happened, how are they supposed to react?

They will conclude that the organization is never going to support that department, and that they should take the first opportunity to leave. If he says nothing he appears to have missed an opportunity, which would suggest that he either lacks vision or concern for the department. The pressure is on him to develop a story to explain to the staff why the opportunity of making that appointment was not as good as it looked. His staff expect a story, and for him to tell the truth as he sees it will do nothing but damage.

He feels, however, that if he can avoid losing too much face in the situation, and 'live to fight another day', he may one day reach the higher ranks, and not be ignored in the same way. He tries not to think about how many times in the past he thought that the next level up was the one where he would be taken seriously.

This is only one of the ways in which the critical self can point out the weaker sides of middle manager storytelling. Another way is that managers find themselves swamped by activities, which they believe they have to carry out, but which do not merit a narrative twist. A senior middle manager (member of the board of directors of a large hospital trust) described it like this:

Well I didn't really do anything yesterday – you know – just stuff. You know, there's all the things that I could be doing to create a better hospital and all that, and all I was doing was just stuff, stuff that has to be done, cleared out of the way, but you can't say any more about it.

So the critical self dismisses a whole lot of the workload as not being worthy of storytelling attention; there is no future in trying to make sense of it, it is 'just stuff'.

Stories and the middle management persona

The middle management persona is one that most people plan to pass through; they do not expect it to be their final resting place. New middle managers have to decide how to present themselves to their subordinates, and a significant part of this will be the stories that they offer to subordinates to explain what is going on. If an important part of the manager's job is to tell stories, the choice both of the stories and the style in which they are told will be a major part of the way that the middle manager's persona is created for their staff.

We create our personas partly by the selection of the stories that we

choose to tell. Under most circumstances, we make such selections reasonably freely according to the way we wish to present ourselves. Throughout this article, I have been suggesting reasons why the middle manager may not have such freedom.

The vice presidents' stories

John had just taken over as chief executive of a big organization. He inherited a large board of directors, with many non-executives from powerful positions in other organizations. Six weeks into the job he arranged an away day with the whole board. At this, he invited each of his three executive vice presidents to give the board a full account of their own area of the business, and how it is going. These are command performances of storytelling. Each of them puts a lot of work, a lot of rehearsal, and as much pre-testing as possible into developing his or her story and working out how best to tell it.

John opens the session by telling the board that he believes the organization to be nothing like as buoyant financially as his predecessor and the director of finance had led everyone to believe, and then suggests that there are major problems within each of the operational areas of the business. With this unexpected introduction the three vice presidents are given their time slot. Their stories have a completely different ring about them as a result of John's introduction. What was meant to be an optimistic set of stories now has the sound of brash hyperbole. While they were telling their stories John, usually a very active man physically with a very responsive face, sits completely still and expressionless. He is hanging his managers out to dry.

The vice presidents have been set up so that their stories are simply going to look silly. However, they cannot afford not to tell any stories, because that would look like recalcitrance. This is a very effective way for a new chief executive to silence even his most senior layer of subordinate managers, by public humiliation.

The vice presidents have been put into a situation where they are a side-show in John's story. Few of the other directors are sensitive enough to notice how the humiliation that they have just witnessed has been brought about. Their account of this event was along the lines of 'Excellent new chief executive; hope he manages to get the executive vice presidents performing quickly'. If the vice presidents were much more junior they could have cried 'foul'. They could have plotted with friends and colleagues, or gone to an industrial tribunal alleging harassment or bullying. In their current station,

however, they cannot do those things. They cannot even discuss with each other what has been done to them, because they can see that they are being picked off, and they have no idea whether they can trust each other not to be John's agents. They are alone, and they have lost control of their own stories.

One of the ritual humiliations which destroys the power of the middle manager as any kind of independent person with their own story for their work is that they are called upon to mouth words of management speak, when they might be aware even as they are saying those words that they do not believe them.

Brian's story

Quite a bit of the time I'm sitting there with one of my staff thinking – 'Bloody hell – did I just say that?' I'm asking them about what their strategy is for something when I know full well that the phrase doesn't mean anything, or I'm asking them what the effect is of what they're saying on customer satisfaction or on the bottom line. I know they don't know the answer, and I know that I wouldn't know the answer either, but I know that I am supposed to bullshit, and that part of the bullshit is that I have to ask them to bullshit, and what's worse, I have to keep a straight face and a stern eye while they're doing it.

Middle managers know that they are expected to utter various phrases that imply or index versions of stories in which they may have no committed belief. While speaking their managerial script they are simultaneously recalling how little respect they have for those among their own bosses, past or present, who spoke managerial platitudes instead of meaningful discourse. The act of speaking this stuff is humiliating, but not to speak it feels like a failure to be a proper manager, and may put their career at risk.

One manifestation of this is that middle managers may feel the pressure to take very seriously things that they used to find funny. And yet at the same time as they are uttering their new, serious discourse, they can also remember the old self that used to find managerial seriousness so ridiculous. At that moment middle managers are likely to envy their subordinates, and are likely to feel that they simply do not know what story to present.

Through the early part of their careers, most managers have places where they can engage in storytelling. This starts from joining the company, and hearing the local stories at their induction. It continues through the formation of friendships, conversations around the water cooler, on the train or at the gym. It proceeds in corridors and in toilets before and after

meetings. In all these venues they have been able to try out versions of stories to see how other people reacted, and to find out whether they liked the way their own stories sounded. They have developed their storytelling voices in these subordinate ranks.

However, on promotion to middle manager, this community of practice is no longer available to them. Because they are in an ambiguous position in the power hierarchy, their stories are now scanned by others for political clues or levers. The relative innocence of their more junior days is lost.

Who owns the plot?

This article has argued that it is at the middle management stage of their career that people have least control of the plot of the stories that they tell and the stories that they live. They are under the eye of senior management in a way that they have not been before. They have a number of confusing and conflicting audiences. The plot is no longer their own. As in Stephen's story, the middle manager is unable to emplot the narrative as freely as they could earlier in their career. As in Brian's story, there is pressure to mouth a set of words that may have little real significance for the speaker, to tell stories that they do not believe. The middle manager's story is one in which they are always at risk of losing the self.

Pressure comes from the expectations both of those below and those above. The middle manager cannot elect to remain silent about those things that he or she does not feel ready to talk about. They are expected to have a view, to be prepared to offer a story to lead their staff. It is important that they have some form of sense to offer to their juniors; that is part of the core of their managerial task. It is simply not an option for a middle manager to say that they have not been able to make sense of what is going on in an organization, because their subordinates would not be able to trust a manager who shirked their responsibility in such a way. In the only case I have seen where a middle manager has made that claim, his staff all believed that he was joking, enjoyed the joke, took it as a compliment that he chose to side with them in mocking the top management, and still had total confidence that he did in fact know what was going on. Like patients who cannot bear to think that their doctor is not omniscient, most juniors cannot tolerate the ambiguity that would result if they believed that their middle manager might genuinely not be able to follow the plot.

Equally, senior members of the organization expect a good story from the middle manager. They expect to be able to ask for reports, to be given well-turned stories, and not to be confronted with confusion. The report is always expected to be tidier than the world being reported upon, which is part of the

duty of sense-making by the middle manager for the senior manager. The story is also supposed to show that the middle manager is safely in control of the situation, and knows how the story will unfold in future. Such feelings are as rare for middle managers as for the rest of us, but that is the expectation from their senior management (e.g. the vice presidents' stories).

Conclusion: The vulnerability of the middle manager

All this puts middle managers into a uniquely vulnerable position. There is pressure to create sense-giving stories simultaneously for the senior management and for subordinates. The two sets of stories are likely to sit uncomfortably together, or even to be in conflict. There is no community of storytelling practice in which middle managers can rehearse these stories, or in which they can explore the inconsistencies and conflicts between them. Middle managers are not even convinced by the stories they themselves are telling. Their working life is characterized by having to give an energetic telling to conflicting stories for different audiences under circumstances where they know that they are always on the edge of dishonesty. Many of them believe that this problematic activity is only temporary; if all goes well, they will pass out of the middle management ranks. They are blissfully ignorant of how much the senior ranks to which they aspire may feel like middle ranks when you get there. However, they still have a period in which they have to tell stories which not even they believe.

Much has been made of the plight of people who do not have a voice in their organizations (Taylor et al., 1995). From the point of view of the middle manager, such people may be seen as fortunate. If not having a voice is bad, how much worse might it be to find yourself compelled to use a voice to make sense for others, when that sense may be carelessly destroyed or ignored by your superiors, while being seen as self-serving and perhaps weak witted by your subordinates. Middle managers have no right to silence, and instead are forced to give voice even if they have no conviction whatever in what they are saying.

I have discussed the way in which superiors may be dismissive of stories to which middle managers have devoted enormous effort. I have also discussed the lack of conviction for many subordinates in considering the stories that their middle managers tell. Finally, we notice that, some of the time, middle managers do not even believe their own story. They have been put in the situation of not being able to create a narrative of their circumstances (Funkenstein, 1993). They are stuck in the middle, removed from good conversation (Quinn, 1996), deprived of stories. They are being turned

into the passionless middle managers that the Corporate Communications Director was upset about in Andy's story.

The survivors of this process go on to be called senior managers; they often find that, like the mountain climb where an apparent summit turns out to have been obscuring higher peaks behind it, there were constraints on their senior managers' storytelling of which they knew nothing previously. The hope that one more step would take them out of range of the millstones may be unfounded.

In this article I have considered the vulnerability of middle managers as revealed by stories told about them and by what we can infer of the stories they construct of their own lives. I suggest that the attempt to convey research data through stories rather than through any more atomistic or propositional form is essential for the kind of understanding that we have reached. The issue is the extent to which middle managers are able to construct whole stories, or story whole lives, for themselves. It is only through working with whole stories that we are able to see how vulnerable those stories are. If there is any power to Hardy's view that we live through narrative, any way of studying life which does not acknowledge this is at risk of missing something crucial. This article suggests that something can be understood about the vulnerability of middle management that could not be understood without the use of narratives and stories. There may be many other aspects of middle management that might offer new understanding if approached with similar methods.

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