

Organizational Defense Mechanisms against Anxiety among Middle Managers in the Saudi Public Sector

Khedher Ibrahim Khoshhal



“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. The two different audiences are not necessarily convinced, and the stories are vulnerable for attacks by both” (Sims, 2003)

Submitted to INSEAD in partial fulfilment of the requirement of the degree of
Executive Master in Change

17-August-2021

Program Directors: Erik van de Loo and Michael Shiel

Thesis Director: Elizabeth Florent Treacy



Abstract

Since the 1990s, reforms have spread throughout public organizations (Giauque, 2015). This unprecedented pace of change has led to immense work stress, which has affected staff attitudes to work and performance (Yu, 2009), as evidenced by the 70% failure rate in change programs (Bucy et al., 2016).

Many have claimed that change comes from the top. Others have stressed that change must come from the front line (Mintzberg, 2009). But few have discussed the important role of middle management - especially in the public sector (Harding et al., 2014). On the contrary, middle management has been labeled as resistance and organizational fat that should be the first to be cut in cost-cutting initiatives (Huy, 2001).

However, can change be sustained without the involvement of middle managers? What happens when we change our perspective and focus on leading change from the middle? This thesis is a psychodynamic study of organizational anxiety from the perspective of middle managers. The study examines the social defense mechanisms that middle managers in the Saudi public sector develop against sources of work anxiety.

The methodology of this study is qualitative, with two lenses: interview-based interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) and organizational ethnography (accidental). The research setting consisted of four Saudi public sector organizations, with 32 interviews and observations from incidental interactions during walks, meetings and workshops. The findings are brought to life through a story-based style.

The study found that there were four main sources of anxiety among middle managers in the public sector in Saudi Arabia: superiors, subordinates, peers, and tasks. The field stories revealed that middle managers responded to each of the four sources of anxiety with the three categories of reactive defense mechanisms: compliance, protection, and control. An interesting finding was that defense mechanisms can also lead to positive behaviors. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

I believe that there is much more to the concept of organizational defense mechanisms. I also believe that middle managers need to be activated as drivers of change in order to achieve the required level of organizational change. The shortest path here is not a straight line, but rather a curved line that dives into the unconscious world before returning to the target point on the surface.

Keywords: *organization, defense, anxiety, middle managers, public sector, Saudi*

Organizational Defense Mechanisms against Anxiety among Middle Managers in the Saudi Public Sector

Here is a traditional Sufi story. Once upon a time there was a man observed an upsetting bump in the middle of his home carpet. Every time he tried to smooth out this bump, it would reappear on another side of the carpet. The man became angry. He tried all sorts of things, stepping on the bump, squishing it, rubbing it, talking to it, but it kept reappearing in frustration. The man thought about it some more and then decided to look under the carpet, so he lifted it up. He was shocked to see an irritated snake slithering around there. He gathered his courage and carefully took care of the snake. Only then could he enjoy a smooth carpet (De varies, 2004).

The above story is a metaphor for my thesis. Often organizational leaders are frustrated when their interventions for superficial symptoms do not result in lasting change. Until these leaders muster the courage to look for and face the snake beneath the carpet, for the underlying cause, the problems will keep resurfacing.

It is widely accepted in the literature that organizational change is difficult and 70% of it fails because of people related challenges (Bucy et al., 2016). A large body of research focuses on the role of leadership in facilitating change (Mintzberg, 2009). Although middle managers play an essential role, authors have paid little attention to them. The world of middle managers is conflictual, complex, and vague. Yet, it has been insufficiently explored in the social science literature (Giauque, 2015).

Since the 1990s, reforms have spread throughout public organizations (Giauque, 2015). These reforms have become even more urgent in the face of increasing pressure to cut public spending (Agostino et al., 2013). This unprecedented pace of change in the public sector has led to immense work stress that has affected employees' work attitudes and performance (Yu, 2009). Saudi Arabia has launched Vision 2030 as a historic transformation for the socio-economic foundations of the country. Accordingly, the transformation has become the norm for every public organization in Saudi Arabia. Middle managers in the public sector are under increased stress. While they strive for stability during organizational change, they also become unhinged as their value is questioned (Harding et al., 2014).

This thesis is a psychodynamic study of organizational anxiety from the perspective of middle managers. The study explores and describes the types of social defense mechanisms that middle managers in the Saudi public sector develop against sources of work anxiety. My main objective is to provide insights that can be used in the literature on organizational change in general and in the public sector in particular. My specific research objectives are as follows:

1. To identify the main sources and types of anxiety among middle managers in the Saudi public sector

2. To examine the behaviors and artifacts that emerge in response to these anxieties
3. To explore the underlying assumptions or organizational defense mechanisms triggered by these anxieties.

I believe that many groups can benefit from the findings of this thesis, including public sector leaders, consultants, and academics interested in driving sustainable organizational change programs through bold discovery of the unconscious world of organizational and systems social defenses.

To answer the above questions, I reviewed the literature on the following topics: Why are middle managers important? Who are they? How do they see themselves? Then I examined change in the public sector in general and Saudi Vision 2030 in particular. Next, I reviewed the psychoanalytic literature on organizational anxiety. What is it? Where does it come from? What defense mechanisms does it trigger?

The methodology of this study is qualitative, with multiple lenses: interview-based interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) and organizational ethnography (accidental). The research setting consisted of four Saudi public sector organizations. I conducted 32 interviews and made many observations during my incidental interactions with Saudi public sector employees during walks, meetings, and workshops. I observed and listened to many stories from the field about how middle managers see their world, what triggers them, and their underlying defense mechanisms. I also sought other views, such as those of executive leaders.

The study found that there are four key common sources of anxiety among middle managers in the Saudi public sector: relationship with superiors and top leaders, subordinates' expectations, tensions with rival peers, and finally the tasks to be accomplished. The field stories also revealed that middle managers responded with the three categories of reactive defenses (Anderson & Adams, 2019): compliance, protection, and control to each of the four sources of anxiety. However, the reactive defense of control was cited most frequently. Finally, an interesting finding revealed that defense mechanisms can also lead to positive behaviors.

I believe that there is much more to the concept of organizational defenses. To achieve the required level of change at the organizational level, middle management must be unleashed and activated to become a driving force for change. The shortest path here is not a straight line, but rather a curved line that dives into the unconscious world before returning to the target point on the surface.

Literature Review

The following literature review attempts to cover current research in areas around the thesis topic. First, I enter the world of middle managers, where I shed light on why they are important. I also use psychoanalytic lenses to understand the world from their perspectives. Next, I provide context on the public sector in general and on the Saudi transformation, in particular. After this, I dig into the realms of anxiety, discussing sources of organizational anxiety and the types of defense mechanisms that it triggers.

Middle Managers

Why is it Important to Study Middle Managers?

The mainstream literature on how to manage large-scale change and organizational transformation focuses mostly on the leadership level (Mintzberg, 2009). The world of middle managers is conflictual, complex, and vague. Yet it has been insufficiently studied in the social-science literature so far (Giauque, 2015).

On the contrary, it is more common to label middle managers as the source of resistance to change. Furthermore, when a transformational or major reengineering project begins, cutting middle managers to save money often follows (Huy, 2001). For top executives, the entire middle management might seem like a barrier, or as Kotter and Cohen (2002) put it: “They’re the rock in the middle”. Some scholars have gone further and have argued that management is the least efficient activity in organizations. They add unneeded cost, increase the risk of bad or slow decision making, and disempower employees (Hamel, 2011).

However, there is another side to the coin: 70% of complex, large-scale change programs do not achieve their stated objectives (Bucy et al., 2016). There are many reasons why middle managers are critical and can be great allies in the goal of increasing success rate. Quy Huy (2001) has argued that top leaders would greatly reduce their success at driving organizational change if they were to underplay the role and value that middle managers bring to the table. He gave four justifications. First, middle managers bring practical entrepreneurial ideas. Second, they are much more capable than top leadership in utilizing informal organizational networks. Third, they are closer to what happens on the ground physically and emotionally and hence have a better sense of what works. Finally, they maintain balance between continuity and change.

Whitehurst (2015) has agreed with Quy, stating that middle managers are still invaluable today to drive organizational change. However, he has added an additional angle, arguing that today’s middle managers should be equipped with new skills and should assume a different role than middle managers of the “command and control” era.

Who are middle managers and what do they do?

There is some level of consensus within the literature regarding the definition of *middle manager* (Harding et al., 2014). The word *middle-management* is usually used to differentiate this group from top leaders and front-line subordinates. Therefore, middle managers cover a wide spectrum (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). Middle managers are two levels under the top executive leader and one level higher than line workers and professionals (Huy, 2001). In the public sector, given its typical bureaucratic and traditional hierarchies, middle managers could be further down within the organization chart: four levels below the head of the agency (i.e., the minister) and one or more levels higher than the front-line staff whom they manage (De Metz et al., 2020).

However, there are many views within the literature regarding what middle managerial work is. Some authors have focused on what middle managers should do and what skills they need to have. Other experiential studies illustrate what they actually do. They add value by utilizing their knowledge of what works on the ground. On the other hand, middle managers could also provide the first layer of resistance. A third group has concentrated more on the effect middle management has on the individuals who occupy it (Harding et al., 2014).

How do middle managers see themselves (Night Vision)?

There is inherent complexity and ambivalence associated with the role of middle managers. Their work is conducted via interactions with both top executives and operational employees. They need to understand and explain organizational strategic visions and transform them into practical implementation plans (Azambuja & Islam, 2019).

Studies of the identity of middle managers have yielded inconsistent insights. The source of complexity for middle managers' identities was described as follows: "their identities emerge from their being subjects and objects of control and subjects and objects of resistance" (Harding et al., 2014). Imagine a middle manager as an individual who is expected to demonstrate authority over subordinates but at the same time is considered relatively unimportant by executive leadership. He or she is looked at by subordinates as fortunate and powerful but is regarded by executive leaders as a novice, a potential future rival or ally who is currently expendable (Sims, 2003). This is a confusing position to occupy. As Gjerde & Alvesson (2020) put it, middle managers find themselves "in the sandwiched middle".

Moreover, anxiety increases as we account for other sources of conflicting expectations beyond superiors and subordinates, such as colleagues, customers, suppliers, or government officials (Han et al., 2014). Middle managers are expected to deal with conflicts and struggles around accountabilities and manipulation (Azambuja & Islam, 2019). As pictured by Foster (2013), "they are caught, as if on a narrow mountain pass, between the demands and anxieties of those above them and the demands and anxieties of those below them, required to contain and

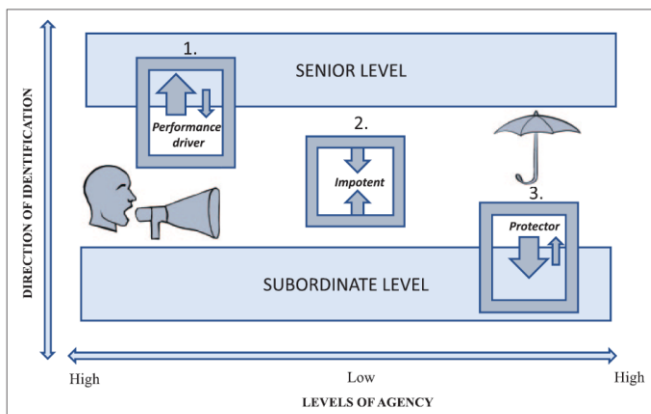
process the anxieties of both and to effectively filter the messages from one to the other. It feels as if there is just too much to hold onto and contain”.

Hence, middle managers are commonly tangled in role conflict, which reduces job satisfaction and increases work-related anxiety. This anxiety may obstruct the attainment of objectives, or negatively affect the self-esteem, status, and image of middle managers for themselves (Han et al., 2014). A key characteristic of the middle manager’s story is vulnerability. A middle manager perceives himself or herself as someone in transition. Identity is temporary (Sims, 2003).

Gjerde & Alvesson (2020) have argued that middle managers adopt one of three identity positions for their stories, which are guided by their identification with superiors, subordinates or neither. First, performance driver, which is a top-down position in which the manager is focused and driven by the power to improve results; second, impotent manager, which is characterized by low energy, confusion and lack of ability to influence either direction; third, umbrella protector, which has a high protecting energy from bottom up, with a strong identification with juniors. The figure below illustrates the three positions.

Figure 1

Three Subject Positions for Middle Managers (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020)



Change in the public sector and Saudi Vision 2030

Change in the Public Sector

The public sector’s importance stems from its responsibility to deliver vital services to improve the lives of the people of a country (De Metz et al., 2020). Since the 1990s, there has been a spread of reforms across public organizations (Giauque, 2015). These reforms have become more urgent with increasing pressures on public spending reductions. Governments around the world are under continuous pressure to be more efficient and at the same time more effective (Agostino et al., 2013).

This unprecedented pace of change in the public sector has created immense work stress, which has affected employees’ work attitudes and performance (Yu, 2009). The real challenges

arise when determining how to help employees adapt to the change (Kotter, 2012). Public sector managers are under compounded stress. While looking for stability during organizational change, they were also “losing the plot,” as their worth is questioned (Harding et al., 2014).

Sometimes middle managers feel that they are asked to perform impossible and unrealistic tasks, with increasing requests for bureaucratic requirements (audits, targets, league tables and penalties for failure and low quality) on one hand and bullying messages (“do this or else”) on the other hand. Foster (2013) described it like this: “People who used to feel professional pride and gain job satisfaction (if not high pay), by being valued as members of the “helping professions”, are now more inclined to see themselves as mistreated societal scapegoats, held almost wholly individually responsible and accountable and at risk of being professionally and publicly named, blamed and shamed when things go wrong with anyone with whom they have been working”.

The continuous-change drive in public sector organizations generates internal pressures that drive either cooperation or competition. If the culture encourages cooperation, employees’ perceptions of their work may be positively influenced. But if the organizational culture instigates competition, employees’ perceptions of their work will likely be negatively influenced. This negative influence can lead employees to watch out for themselves and their personal interests more than for the interests of their organization, their colleagues, or their beneficiaries (Sims, 2010).

Saudi Vision 2030 – an Historic Transformation

Saudi Arabia launched its ambitious Vision 2030 early in 2016. The vision is meant to unleash an unprecedented transformation of the nation’s economic and social fabric. It aims to reduce the country’s dependence on oil to more diversified economic enablers. The Saudi Vision 2030 builds on the country’s competitive advantages, which include the following: (1) It occupies the heart of Arab and Islamic worlds; (2) it is an investment power that is able to create a more diverse and sustainable economy; and (3) it enjoys a strategic position from which to act as a key player for the international trade and connect three continents (Africa, Asia and Europe). Accordingly, Vision 2030 is constructed around three themes: (1) a vibrant society, (2) a thriving economy, and (3) an ambitious nation. The third theme in particular directly affects public sector workers. It aims to build an effective, transparent, accountable, enabling, and high-performing government (<https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/v2030/overview>).

Work-Anxiety or Stress

What is Work-Anxiety or Stress?

Anxiety is a double-edged weapon. On one hand, some level of anxiety offers a vital source of productive tension that enables people to achieve their potential for creativity (Gutmann, 1993) and get things done efficiently (Meško et al., 2013). On the other hand, beyond a threshold,

anxiety or excessive stress can hinder capacity to function effectively, which threatens to overwhelm and may eventually lead to madness (Gutmann, 1993).

Yet, stress is often regarded from the negative side, as the most common disease of the new era. It is an individual form of negative physiological and psychological reactions. When a people are under stress, they feel that their well-being is endangered, and they may not be able to cope with it (Meško et al., 2013).

Stress has consequences for both the individual and the organization overall. With individuals, it negatively affects work performance, decreases motivation, and causes fatigue. At an organizational level, it has the potential to increase employee absenteeism. Work stress is common for middle managers. It is usually associated with too much or too little work, conflicting career demands, unskilled superiors, long-work hours, and tension regarding work-life balance (Meško et al., 2013). Other scholars have found that role conflict does not significantly cause reduced work satisfaction. However, it does lead to significantly higher work-related anxiety. A proactive personality can help managers cope with this anxiety (Han et al., 2014).

Sources of Anxiety in Organizations?

For middle managers, there are many drivers of anxiety and stress at work. Anxiety and stress primarily come from interactions with others, most importantly executives and top leaders. Reactive, narcissistic leaders are hard to deal with. They were themselves likely raised to adulthood with a mix of negative feelings accumulated from early childhood. Such leaders would likely have developed feelings of entitlement as a coping mechanism for a sense of deprivation, which may lead them to think that they deserve special handling and that rules and regulations do not necessarily apply to them. They may also have developed coping mechanisms for their feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. These may include an excessive feeling of self-importance and arrogance and an ongoing need for appreciation. In general, reactive narcissistic leaders become obsessed with power, status, prestige, and superiority. They do not accept disagreement or criticism; hence, they gather “yea-sayers” around them. When things go wrong, they typically do not take personal responsibility but rather shift the blame and scapegoat others. Such leaders have an immense power to infuse their immediate environments with fear and anxiety (De Vries, 2004).

Another important component in the relationship between executives and middle managers is transference, that is, the use of relational patterns from the past to cope with situations in the present. Freud described it as “confusion in time and place.”, De Vries (2004) described transference as follows: “It means that no relationship is a new relationship; each relationship is colored by previous relationships”. So, at work, people are coping with unfulfilled and unconscious family needs, parental characters, and siblings over issues of power. In other words, middle managers are dealing with superiors and peers at the present time as if they were important

people from their own pasts. This discrepancy between the reality of everyday work and the subconscious may cause anxiety and even more serious psychological challenges (De Vries, 2004).

Mirroring and idealization are two subtypes of transference patterns that are common in the workplace. Mirroring is described as follows: “taking our cues about being and behaving from those around us”. The dynamic of mirroring between leaders and followers in an organizational context can be collusive, thereby leading to a vicious cycle of mutual admiration (De Vries, 2004).

On the other hand, De Vries has described idealizing as: “a way to cope with feelings of helplessness, by idealizing people that are important to us, beginning with our first caretakers, assigning powerful imagery to them. Through this idealizing process, we hope to combat helplessness and acquire some of the power of the person admired”. Therefore, idealizing transference is used as a protective shield for followers (De Vries, 2004).

Defense Mechanisms

What are the Social/Organizational Defense Mechanisms and why do they Exist?

Human behavior is largely motivated by defenses against anxiety. The primary task of these defenses is to shield us from experiencing the worries that can be triggered in relationships, in work, and in trying to alter familiar trends of behavior (Czander & Eisold, 2003). Social defenses concern a system of relationships within a specific social structure. They are exhibited by a group to help its members cope with depressive anxiety (De Vries, 2004). In an organizational context where anxiety is common, employees reach out to such defense mechanisms to deal with it. This becomes more apparent and challenging when there are insufficient safe spaces for employees to share and vent (De Vries & Balazs, 2005). It takes time for a social defense to evolve within a system. Social defense is usually unconscious and occurs between individuals and groups of the organization. The developed form of socially structured defense mechanisms are inclined to be a characteristic of exterior reality with which old and new members of the organizations need to conform (Menzies, 1960).

These social defense mechanisms have the potential to dangerously hinder organizational functioning by generating disruptions and shifts of focus from true underlying issues (De Vries & Balazs, 2005). However, social defenses can also be used in a positive context. Many have traditionally been utilized by groups to maintain a constructive level of anxiety and protect against system collapse (Gutmann, 1993).

Types of Social/Organizational Defense Mechanisms?

Wilfred Bion identified three unconscious basic assumptions that have become foundational for the study of organizational dynamics. These assumptions make it difficult for

groups to work together productively and prevent them from accomplishing their primary organizational tasks. The first assumption is “dependency.” This occurs when employees unconsciously consider their leader to be a person who can and is supposed to provide protection and direction, as their parents did in earlier years. Such employees have similar feelings of helplessness and fear of the external environment. Therefore, they seek to associate with a strong leader who can take all initiatives to guide them forward (De Vries, 2004).

Bion’s second unconscious assumption is called “fight-flight.” Its basic premise is that the organizational realm is an unsafe space and that its members therefore need to fight or flee to cope with danger. Therefore, people are inclined to divide the organization into groups of allies and enemies. Fight reactions show up in hostility against the self, colleagues, or leadership. They appear in different forms, like jealousy, competition, elimination, and special relationships with key leaders. On the other hand, flight reactions are more about the avoidance of others, absenteeism, and quitting. (De Vries, 2004).

The third unconscious assumption by Bion is “pairing.” As its name suggests, pairing up with a powerful individual or a group may help a person manage anxiety and loneliness. Pairing also leads to splitting up the groups, which may lead to dynamics of conflict within and between groups. Hence, pairing may create further splits within an organization (De Vries, 2004).

Bion’s three unconscious basic assumptions expose underlying anxiety within groups. When these assumptions become a norm in an organization, they offer evidence that its leadership is not properly handling the evolving anxiety with the system (Menzies, 1960). Typical go-to solutions for leaders include new rules and regulations, changes in organizational charts or job descriptions. Usually, such structural interventions lack sufficient containment. Therefore, employees and groups participate in regressive defense mechanisms like splitting, projection, displacement, denial, and others. Once these defenses are embraced by more employees, they can be characterized as social defenses and constructed to help their adopters deal with anxiety. If they become widespread, they can become part of the social fabric or DNA of the system, leading it to become dysfunctional. As a result, more bureaucratic and control procedures are institutionalized at the expense of empathy, awareness, and meaning (De Vries, 2004).

Despite the great insights Bion has introduced to the theory of group dynamics, some scholars have argued that his methods were not completely scientific. For example, some critics conclude that he based his insights on a small therapeutic group. Yet Bion seems to extend his results and generalize his hypotheses to large groups or even to society overall. Also, the three types of assumptions are not necessarily mutually exclusive and comprehensively exhaustive. Individuals and groups can show elements of the different assumptions at the same time (Sherwood, 1964).

There are other forms of social defense mechanisms that also apply within organizational contexts. For example, “splitting” involves separating the world into two halves: black and white, us against them. Also, “projective identification” involves passing on to others the negative feelings one has within himself/herself but cannot admit (De Vries & Balazs, 2005). “Regression” to an earlier stage of development or more basic form of functioning is another common tendency. Another primitive defense mechanism is “denial.” It involves denying responsibility and accepting specific matters (Khaleelee, 2010). Some become too self-critical (Sims, 2003). At times, difficult or challenging parts of a system are projected into a subsystem or even onto individuals who are then blamed and penalized as scapegoats (Czander & Eisold, 2003).

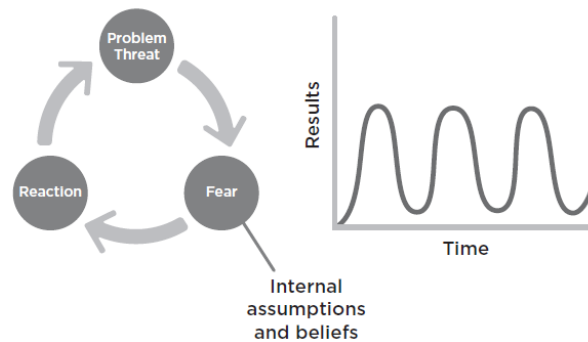
When the anxiety becomes severe, driven by a reactive narcissistic leader’s hostility, some people might adopt a defense mechanism of “identification with the aggressor”, as described by Freud in 1966. Basically, when individuals face a more capable power, they feel an urge to become like that power. In this way, they unconsciously believe that they are protecting themselves from upcoming aggression. Furthermore, they start to copy the aggressor and make threats (De Vries, 2004). Often, an organization’s bureaucratic processes, policies and procedures, can be considered an organizational defense. In this case, filling the form becomes more important than accomplishing the task (De Vries & Balazs, 2005). At times, choice of language and tone can be considered a social defense (Little et al., 2001). The term *management* or *manager* might be overused by team members to dehumanize and depersonalize known individuals (Foster, 2013).

How Anxieties and Defense Mechanisms Affect the Task

Humans adopt a paradigm of problem-reacting for protection. Once a problem or threat to a person's task is identified, a primitive sense of fear is triggered, leading to a reactive defense mechanism. The person's goal is to eliminate this unpleasant feeling and return to normal state. Therefore, the person is motivated to reduce the anxiety felt and focus on solving the problem. Once the person feels some positive results, her anxiety disappears. Therefore, she would no longer be motivated to maintain the solution. After a while, the task would suffer again and a new problem or threat would emerge. In this way, a vicious cycle continues with only short-term solutions and no real growth, see Figure 2 below (Anderson & Adams, 2019).

Figure 2

A reactive structure (Anderson & Adams, 2019)



A person living within a problem-reacting paradigm is likely to respond to a threat through one of three reactive tendencies. The first tendency is compliance, which carries the energy of moving with or toward something. A compliant person is usually driven by a feeling of fear and the need to be liked. This person typically react with behaviours such as conforming and pleasing others, and he generally follows the rules and regulations strictly.

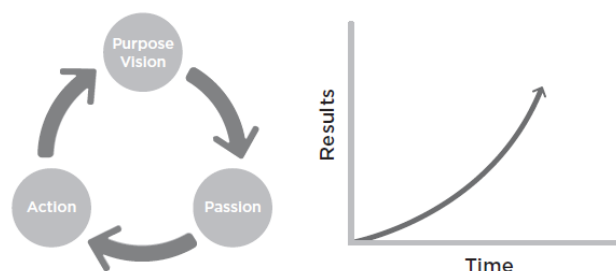
The second tendency is protection, which has the energy of moving away from something. A person with a protective tendency is usually driven by a feeling of disgust and the need to be right and to be recognized as the smartest. This person usually reacts with behaviours such as disengagement, disapproval, criticism and arrogance.

The third tendency is controlling, which has the energy of moving against something or fighting. A controlling person is usually driven by a feeling of anger and needs to be recognized as the best. She reacts with behaviours such as aggression, disempowering others and overstretching (Anderson & Adams, 2019).

A new paradigm is needed, One that is more outcome-creating. In this mindset, a person would act according to a vision and would be driven by purpose and passion. The more results achieved the more the passion is ignited. In this paradigm, the person would use their anxieties and stress to fuel their passion for achievement in a sustainable manner. This process is shown in Figure 3 (Anderson & Adams, 2019).

Figure 3

A creative structure (Anderson & Adams, 2019)



Methodology

Method

The methodology of this study is qualitative, with multiple lenses: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) that is interview-based and organizational ethnography (accidental). Qualitative research is primarily interested in the quality of experience instead of in causal relationships. It seeks to determine what meaning people give to phenomena and how people perceive and interpret the world and the events they experience. In this type of research, data is typically gathered in real and natural settings (e.g., work). Analysis of the data considers both participants' and researchers' interpretations of phenomena (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In this thesis, I take a system psychodynamic angle to analysis and interpretation. As Barrett (2007) explained it: "Systems-psychodynamic qualitative research is "an inductive process that involves shaping the instrument of research—the researcher—as a medium for the discovery and interpretation of meanings".

The IPA methodology has become progressively popular in European and American psychology. As a qualitative approach, IPA's basic aim is to examine how people understand and interpret their experiences. It builds on the foundations of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography. Researchers who use this methodology seek to understand from participants' points of view. This makes the research dynamic and evolving, as both participants and the researcher are active contributors to the meaning-making of the participant worldview. This aspect facilitates richer and more insightful analysis. Researchers concentrate on the specifics of individuals rather than on the general. However, they then generate emerging analytical themes or psychological conceptualizations that are commonly substantiated with examples from individuals' own words, narratives, and stories (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

An IPA type of study is time-consuming, as it provides full appreciation to individual cases by taking the context around them into consideration. Therefore, IPA sample sizes are usually small. The aim with IPA is to generate an in-depth investigation of certain phenomena and not to produce a generalized theory. For example, IPA studies have been published with as few as one participant. It is uncommon to conduct an IPA study with more than 15 participants, though this is possible (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

The second qualitative method I use in this study is ethnography. Ethnography allows a researcher to utilize a mixture of field tools and techniques to facilitate an in-depth examination of empirical locations. Since the early 20th Century, the industry of organization-and-management studies has used ethnography as a way of investigating the particulars of organizational realms (Aroles, 2020).

Accidental ethnography is a type of ethnography that pays attention to accidental moments: i.e., those unintentional instances when a researcher is not involved in an interview or a relevant research work but rather is involved in a routine task that is not part of the research. Basically, a researcher gets an unintentional moment of “aha” insight that is relevant to the research context. It comes almost by chance or accident (Fujii, 2015).

Method's Fit With Research Aim and Objectives

In its essence, this thesis is an inquiry, using psychodynamic lenses, into organizational anxieties from the perspective of middle managers. The study aims to explore and describe the types of defense mechanisms which have formed among middle managers in the Saudi public sector against sources of work anxiety. Hence, the qualitative methodology is best suited to uncover such hidden insights.

I do not attempt to generalize the findings but rather focus on bringing insight from an actual field space. Therefore, this study attempts to add insights regarding organizational culture change. All three research objectives were directed toward this path. The research begins by identifying sources and types of anxiety among middle managers in the public sector, proceeds to examine what behaviors and artifacts show up in response to those anxieties, and then investigates what underlying assumptions or organizational defense mechanisms are triggered by those anxieties.

Research Setting

Why I Chose this Context

A deeper understanding of the underlying assumptions of drivers and barriers is especially important now in a country like Saudi Arabia. I emphasized Saudi Vision 2030 to give some color to the context of my research, which is conducted within the Saudi public sector, where employees are surrounded with intensity of change. As a Saudi, I know that my country has embarked on a comprehensive and unprecedented course of change under the umbrella of Vision 2030. I feel proud to be one of many architects of this change. I see a strong governmental force that is driving, measuring and improving agreed aspirational performance objectives.

However, within the Saudi Vision 2030 movement, the people appear to be relatively overlooked. I have not seen enough attention given to considering how we can deliver our aspirational targets through public sector employees. I have wondered, given the traditionally secured jobs of civil work, how we can get employees excited, engaged, and enabled to get things done with sufficient alignment and agility. This is a large question that requires a wide range of interventions.

When I analyzed the challenges, I observed that the country is already conducting major workforce interventions at two levels: the top and entry levels. New leadership with significant experiences and capabilities have been appointed to lead across public entities. The entry level is tightened up, and joining criteria have become more refined and skill-based. However, I have noticed that the middle managers are almost forgotten. In my consulting work, we have surveyed the health of the culture in more than 10 public entities in Saudi, covering almost 50,000 employees from different sectors over the past six years. Often, I found that middle managers with four to eight years of tenure gave lower health and satisfaction scores than their average organizations. For reasons of client and company confidentiality, I will not share any further specifics of these studies.

The bottom line is that middle managers in the public sector comprise a potential weakness in the chain of change within Saudi Vision 2030. It is unlikely that the whole system will effectively move toward desired change if a critical mass does not first buy into it. Malcom Gladwell (2006) calls reaching a critical mass: “the tipping point,” and he defined it as follows: “It’s the point of critical mass, where your idea goes from interesting to a few to must-have for everyone”. Focusing only on top leadership is not likely to be sufficient to reach the tipping point. Moreover, it might be inefficient to reach out to all front-liners. It seemed to make sense to me, as perhaps a better return on investment, that we focus our efforts disproportionately in unlocking change momentum at the middle level.

Gaining access to many entities in the Saudi public sector was not a significant challenge for me given my consulting work and previously established relationships. I have also utilized my daily observations and encounters with clients in the public sector. However, to maintain confidentiality, I have kept all the names of people and entities anonymous.

I gained most of my learning via interviews and ethnographic walks from two sources. One is in the healthcare sector in Riyadh, the capitol of Saudi. Another is from the municipalities and rural-affairs sector of a different city in Saudi. In both cases, I obtained permission from key leaders at sites. The people I interviewed were either among top leadership or middle managers. Selections were mostly facilitated via top executives, and a few were randomly picked from reference to an organizational chart.

The interviews were conducted one-on-one, in-depth, in a natural discussion setting, at the subjects’ work offices. My discussion guide questions are inspired by the work of Edgar Schein (2017), who described the three levels of organizational culture as: “artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions”. The exact script I followed for the interviews is found in Appendix 1.

The table below summarizes the interviewed subjects’ levels and sectors and provide demographic data regarding age and nationality. Note that the number of conducted interviews,

32, is probably more than needed given the IPA methodology requirement. However, I leveraged the interviews I conducted earlier within Practicum 1 and Practicum 2 exercises, which also covered insights from the Saudi public sector culture. The interviewed sample is mainly skewed toward middle managers, males, locals with an average age of more than 40 years. Averages are as follows: 81% middle managers vs. 19% executive leaders; 87% males vs. 13% females; 84% locals vs. 16% non-locals; 69% of 40 years old or more vs. 31% less than 40 years old.

Table 1

Interview Sample Description

#	Level	Sector	Gender	Age	Nationality
1	Middle Manager	Human Resources and Labor	F	25-30	Local
2	Middle Manager	Human Resources and Labor	M	30-35	Local
3	Middle Manager	Human Resources and Labor	M	45-50	Local
4	Middle Manager	Human Resources and Labor	M	35-40	Local
5	Middle Manager	Human Resources and Labor	M	35-40	Local
6	Executive leader	Human Resources and Labor	M	45-50	Non-Local
7	Executive leader	Education	M	50-55	Local
8	Middle Manager	Education	M	45-50	Local
9	Middle Manager	Education	M	30-35	Local
10	Middle Manager	Education	F	35-40	Non-Local
11	Middle Manager	Education	M	50-55	Non-Local
12	Middle Manager	Municipality	M	45-50	Local
13	Executive Leader	Municipality	M	40-45	Local
14	Middle Manager	Municipality	M	30-35	Local
15	Executive Leader	Municipality	M	50-55	Local
16	Middle Manager	Municipality	M	45-50	Local
17	Middle Manager	Municipality	M	25-30	Local
18	Middle Manager	Municipality	M	55-60	Local
19	Middle Manager	Municipality	M	45-50	Local
20	Middle Manager	Municipality	M	50-55	Local
21	Middle Manager	Municipality	M	35-40	Local
22	Middle Manager	Municipality	M	40-45	Local
23	Executive Leader	Health Care	M	55-60	Local
24	Executive Leader	Health Care	M	50-55	Local
25	Middle Manager	Health Care	M	50-55	Local
26	Middle Manager	Health Care	M	45-50	Local
27	Middle Manager	Health Care	M	40-45	Local
28	Middle Manager	Health Care	M	50-55	Local
29	Middle Manager	Health Care	F	50-55	Non-Local
30	Middle Manager	Health Care	M	35-40	Local
31	Middle Manager	Health Care	M	40-45	Local
32	Middle Manager	Health Care	F	55-60	Non-Local

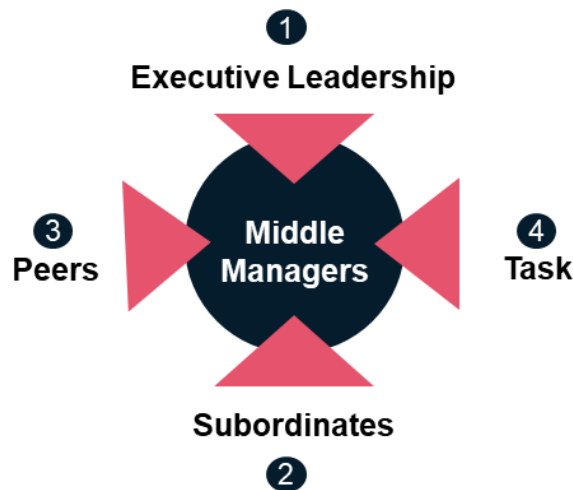
Finally, I included some insights from my daily observations and interactions with Saudi public sector managers during my consulting work. I consider such insights to be part of my accidental ethnography, as explained earlier.

Analysis and Findings

I listened to many stories regarding how middle managers see their world, what triggers them and how their underlying defense mechanisms show up. I also solicited other views, like those of executive leaders and subordinates, regarding their interactions with middle managers. From all of this, I identified four common sources of anxiety among middle managers (see Figure 2 below): First and foremost was the relationship with superiors and top leaders; the second source was the expectations of subordinates; the third source was the tension with rival peers; and the last source was the complexity and urgency of the tasks to be delivered. For perspective, I hypothesized that there would be a fifth source for anxiety in relation to the beneficiaries (customers). However, I did not encounter sufficient mentions of customers in the stories I gathered from interviews and field work. This is a finding that I elaborate on in the task-anxiety section below.

Figure 4

Four Themes to Sources of Anxiety Facing Middle Managers in Public Sector



Next, I explain the analysis of the four sources of anxiety as four themes. It is worth noting that I discuss the themes as if they were independent. In practice, however, they may manifest simultaneously and influence each other. For each anxiety theme, the analysis is shown with the following structure: An overall anxiety source is explained with reference to typical triggers, with an elaboration from actual stories and quotes from the field, which are summarized under specific

descriptive titles. Under each title, the key artifacts or visible behaviors are explained, and this is followed by an attempt to identify mindsets or defense mechanisms that exist below the surface.

Theme #1 – Defense Mechanisms against Anxieties Driven by Superiors and Executive Leadership

As mentioned earlier, middle managers feel sandwiched between different forces of anxiety (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). However, I have sensed that the greatest stress is driven by their relations with leadership, as indicated by the high percentage of time and tension shared within the stories.

One Way Street, do it or Else. Many of the middle managers revealed that leadership communicates with them using aggressive language and attitudes. In a medical public sector entity, I noticed a clear chain of command. If a senior said something, others followed. One leader explained how medical cases are handled, where the lead consultant has the ultimate say. Whatever he/she says gets executed through lower-ranking physicians and nurses. In my mind, I had an association with a military environment. One leader said, “You can’t convince people, you must shock them, use the authoritarian power. No room for disagreements and second thoughts. Look at Saudi Vision 2030, it was mainly series of shocks. There was no other way, the government could have done it.” Another senior leader said, “If you are not a wolf, the other wolves will eat you.” I sensed a lot of bullying from senior to junior physicians. I also sensed that junior doctors displaced their frustrations onto nurses and technicians. One nurse said that, “There is an established hierarchy here: Doctors, even new ones, are above anyone else. Verbal abuse is an expected norm and people just won’t risk their careers to fight it.” I also kept puzzling with the idea of a military environment in health care. In my mind, the healthcare industry should be more of a place of care and compassion. But then wondered what would happen if each junior physician started to experiment on patients. I could see why military control made some sense in a hospital environment. I would never have thought about it like this before this observation.

In another public sector entity within a different sector, a middle manager spoke as follows: “If I do not follow orders, I risk punitive retaliations. You know, I may get transferred to a remote area or get overlooked for promotions or other benefits.” It didn’t matter what their job titles entailed; many middle managers felt that they just needed to do what they were asked by their superiors to do. I also sensed bitterness from many who perceived their leaders as incompetent as judged by their educational degrees. One middle manager said that “It doesn’t matter what is my job title, you just do what your manager asks you to do!” Another said, “We are a “Robotic Yes” culture norm. In Arabic we say, “سم طال عمرك”. It is seen as socially difficult to question or share a negative comment with someone higher in the hierarchy.” The Arabic phrase translates to something like, “Yes, you may live longer.” I think this is a type of transference

social-defense mechanism that is common in the Saudi culture. People treat superiors at work as if they are dealing with important people from their pasts (De Vries, 2004), like parents, uncles, or teachers.

Also, there is an overall feeling of insecurity. Middle managers do not feel safe about speaking up or making mistakes. One said: “Leaders take ideas for change as if we are personally attacking them, better to say nothing.” Another one consciously said: “You might also get in trouble for stepping on a wrong person’s shoes.”

I also wonder at times if the public sector environment is set up for following orders and establishing ranks rather than for inviting discussions and openness. During a walk in one organization with 5,000+ employees, I was puzzled that I saw no meeting rooms. There was only one room for the big boss. I asked a middle manager about it. To my surprise, he was unsure what the meeting rooms would be needed for. Then, he said, “Meeting rooms would probably be used for wasting time and gossiping! What else?”

Another common observation across most public sector offices is that hierarchy and power are established in the meeting room of the big boss. It usually has a sort of thrown chair where the most senior leader sets. The next in rank sets next, and so forth, usually following assigned tags with names and titles in front of each chair. Much attention and effort is given to such protocols.

I wonder if these examples manifest a viciously reinforced cycle of defense mechanisms between leaders and followers. Leaders feel safer and more grandiose if they are more in control and are comfortable with having followers placed in expected positions ready to receive their autocratic power. Middle managers, on the other hand, may also feel safer in those positions, thereby exhibiting compliance defense mechanisms. Somehow, both leaders and followers seem to collude in reinforcing the defense mechanisms for each other.

Breaking Trust While Tracking Phantastic Objects. Another event which showed that some level of trust was broken between leaders and their organizations, including middle managers, happened at a public entity within the municipalities sector, where the top leader mandated the whole organization to sign in five times a day as a proof of attendance. He believed that this intervention was the cure for a pandemic issue. He explained it in a TV interview as follows: “Our citizens are impacted by the low productivity of our employees, where 75% of them sign their attendance in the morning and immediately leave their offices. The new mandate of signing-in with digital finger stamps five-times a day will solve the issue.” Indeed, this measure seemed to improve employee attendance. However, many mentioned that productivity actually became worse. One middle manager from the same organization said that, “staff bitterly agreed to sign in five times a day, but felt happy to retaliate by doing nothing other than that.” Another middle manager noted that, “employees used all possible excuses to break out of the building even

if they didn't need to. For example, most asked for excuses to leave early to pick their children from schools. The funny thing is that many of them didn't even have children!" Another shared an interesting association and summarized it like this: "We became like an airplane driving in a highway traffic jam! We lost power and motivation to do anything else."

Some leaders had a belief in a magical "proper organization structure" that would somehow automatically fix all issues. Others, continued to change the middle managers as a scapegoating defense mechanism against the anxiety of failure. They seem to have a phantastic-object (Tuckett & Taffler, 2008) desire in mind as they hunt for the ultimate structure or the super managers that will bring the best results and reemphasize their glory as astonishing leaders. One leader said: "We do not have talented managers. In search for talent, it is ok to use trial and error and continue changing the organizational structure based on what I observe." Another leader whispered as follows: "My success formula is to assign accountabilities for managers. If they perform, I take credit; and if they do not, I show action by replacing them, and we start another cycle. The trick is, in reality, they never perform, and no one is paying attention. So, I keep changing them. I feel like a chess master." One middle manager explained it like this: "I do not want to show my business cards or place my new title at the door. I could be replaced any day, and it would be embarrassing!"

Watch Out for Reaction Formation, no Free Lunch. Other leaders use more manipulative techniques, thereby showing a lack of trust. To deal with the anxiety they feel regarding maintaining control or passing blame to middle managers if things go wrong, they show that they wish to help too much. Consistent with a defense mechanism of "reaction formation," they exaggerate in showing care and support despite their opposite feelings. I attended a meeting in a public sector entity during which the leader asked a staff member to read detailed policies and procedures to the middle managers in attendance. I noticed the leader took his time and was careful that all the details were mentioned and read. He asked in a fatherly tone if everyone understood or if further clarification was needed. After the meeting, I approached him and noted how considerate he had been. He smiled wickedly and said, "I just wanted to put in record that they were properly informed about these policies. So, they can't deny knowing later-on when they get caught making mistakes."

Manipulation can also come in many other forms. In an interview, a middle manager at another public entity spoke as follows: "Across all my long years here, I have seen all leaders planting spies in every department. They always position them as help with additional capacity!"

Some leaders seem to give vague directions to middle managers to avoid blame if things go wrong. Even when they share orders via official letters, they write only high-level directives with no clear instructions. One middle manager gave an example: "My superior, just like all

others, shares with me the official letters that come from the ministry, with only few generic words, like these: *for action* or *do what is needed*. If later on a problem occurs, I am the only one to be blamed.”

The above perceptions of middle managers regarding how their superiors behave triggered a wide range of anxieties and consequently evoked multiple defense mechanisms. The following are some examples.

Luck Favors the Connected, so Follow the Alphas. With all the perceived aggression of superiors, many middle managers seem to feel weak and helpless. It seems that, in their efforts to combat their feelings of helplessness, some have idealized the strong superiors. They found a channel to acquire some power from the person feared.

This has led to forming a need among middle managers to stay as friendly allies and close acquaintances on the teams of strong leaders. Such an arrangement seemed like a win-win relationship. Because they are friends, the boss can trust that the middle managers will cover him/her when needed for violating or going around policies and procedures. In exchange, the boss will reward and protect them when needed.

One leader said that, “I like to ensure that I only have friends in my team. Your friends won’t stab you in the back during tough times.” One middle manager spoke as follows: “People feel they need to pick sides to survive around here. Most want to follow the strongest leaders who can bring the goodies to their teams.”

Another middle manager said that, “Today, only few leaders are strong and able to show the work of their teams and stand behind them. Everyone wants to work with them. You would feel recognized, proud, and supported. However, with the weak leaders, people will be lost and run over.”

In many meetings I attended within public sector, I observed managers presenting while carefully looking at the powerful leaders. It seemed that they were consistently looking for clues from the leaders’ facial expressions regarding whether they should support an idea or even whether they should continue talking about it.

Reduction of Fears by Delegating up. In the public sector, accountability for decisions seems to be lost. Leaders give verbal orders or push vague written directions to middle managers. When things go wrong, it is usually the middle managers or their teams who suffer the consequences. With increasing anxiety, middle managers seem to protect themselves by avoiding decisions and delegating them up, back to superiors. This can be a frustrating cycle of wasted time and effort. The environment is characterized by fear and “dependency” (De Vries, 2004) as defense mechanisms become the norm.

One leader said that, “decisions are not taken until escalated to the top leadership. Managers do not know how to discuss work with each other.” A middle manager noted the following: “You feel that people are just waiting for me to make a mistake and... boom! All hell gets loose. I get investigated like a criminal with no one protecting me. No way I fall for that.” Another middle manager said the following: “We see anti-corruption people dragging managers for investigations every day. People talk behind you even if you are totally innocent. It is an image problem, and it is not worth the risk. I am certainly not paid enough for that. Leave it to those powerful leaders to sign documents. I am singing nothing.”

If You do not Sail, You Will not Sink. Other middle managers seemed to deal with this anxiety differently. They adopt a “flight” defense mechanism. They basically hide by avoiding taking higher positions or responsibilities. Some avoid showing up to important meetings by using a “rationalization” defense mechanism each time. Some feel or pretend to be sick. It could be a symptom of a “somatization” defense mechanism. It seems that they are coping with the perception of low benefits compared to high risks by finding comfort in the shadows. One leader said, “I tried to offer the position to many managers, but they escaped. They can’t handle the expected stress, claiming sickness or sharing strange reasons, like a need to focus on a daughter’s marriage.” But upon speaking with middle managers, I obtained a different perspective. One middle manager explained it as follows: “If you take a higher leadership position, you will be sandwiched between two evils. Resist orders from superiors and risk being blacklisted, overlooked for promotions, or potentially relocated to the middle of nowhere; do what you are asked and risk getting investigated by anti-corruption authorities and potentially face reputational damage if not a jail time. So, you better stay away from all that to put sufficient bread on your family table.”

Catch me if You Can. If You Treat me Like a Child, I Will Act Like One. It seemed that many middle managers dealt with their anxieties using another approach—“fighting”—though in a passive-aggressive way. They adopted a “regression” defense mechanism, which involves going back to an earlier stage of development, which could be early childhood (Khaleelee, 2010). I also think there is an element of “projective identification” involved. Basically, if you treat us like children, we will fulfil your projection and act like children. One middle manager used the following rationalization about other managers who misuse organizational assets and work time for personal benefits: “Some managers use their own time and cars to do organizational work with no compensation or even a thank you! I guess it is fair when they do the other way around: use the organizational time and assets for their own benefit.” I also explained above, when superiors project their lack of trust onto managers, they affect them such that they act accordingly. The case of demanding five signatures of attendance per day is an example of how employees retaliated by passive-aggressively doing nothing but those five signatures.

Theme #2 – Defense Mechanisms against Anxieties Driven by Relationship with Subordinates

Another significant source of anxiety for middle managers is subordinates' expectations. On one hand, middle managers feel the need to control subordinates to meet the demands of their superiors. On the other hand, subordinates come with their conflicting expectations for protection, benefits, and additional resources. I found that middle managers deal with these anxieties differently. Some identify with their aggressive superiors and cascade their hostile attitudes and pressures downward. Another group tends to depersonalize their relations with their subordinates. Others surrender to the bottom pressures and go for creating some harmony or even struggle to buy their loyalty. The following stories illustrate such types.

Control the Herd and Keep Those Wannabe Individuals in the Dark Shadows. Some middle managers become extensions of their superiors' hostility. In this way, they believe they can be accepted by their superiors and unconsciously believe that they are protecting themselves from further aggression. It could also be seen as a "displacement" defense mechanism in which they redirect their frustrations from their superiors toward their subordinates (De Vries, 2004). One middle manager proudly spoke as follows: "I finished the presentation with everyone in my team hating me. I challenged and embarrassed them in front of the big boss. I felt the boss was proud of me. There is no place here for underdelivering." Other managers go extra miles to keep their talented subordinates in the shadows. One senior leader said that, "unfortunately, many managers do not provide talented employees under them with needed exposure or recognition in front of top leadership. They know those employees could replace them the next day."

Depersonalization: Let's Call Them Something Else. Some middle managers deal with their anxiety with subordinates by refusing to recognize them as individuals, especially during challenging times. For example, during a performance evaluation, I noticed that they refer to employees as cases and refrain from saying names. The same thing occurred when dealt with complicated customer challenges, they use case numbers. This evoked an association in my mind with how prisoners are called: i.e., with a number rather than a name. In this way, it becomes easier for security people to dehumanize them and treat them with cruelty. In this case, the "use of language" or "dehumanization" can be a defense mechanism.

Buying Loyalty and Artificial Harmony. There are other types of middle managers who deal with their anxieties still differently. Their primary desire is to feel loved and popular among their subordinates. They believe that their subordinates will do nothing unless they are showered with benefits and goodies (e.g., overtime, international training, a car, a corner office, or a printer, etc.). Some also refrain from sharing negative feedback with their subordinates, thinking that will break their relationships. However, all of this could be a projection of their own desires directed

toward their subordinates. One manager put it this way: “We are a culture of large families and tribes; therefore, we need to be nice to each other. We can’t just give bad performance feedback, otherwise we develop reputations as bad people. The word travels beyond work.” Another manager spoke as follows: “To keep my team loyal, I try to be generous with overtime pay, luxury offsites, and touristic trainings. Sometimes, I go further by creating positions and titles.” A third one said that, “It is a shared understanding between us and top leadership. Managers will use part of the assigned budgets for projects for the benefit of their teams. This is the only way they can keep their teams loyal. Leadership knows this but keep a closed eye. It works this way!”

Theme #3 – Defense Mechanisms against Anxieties Driven by Relationship with Peers.

Peers comprise a third source of anxiety for middle managers. They can drive the environment to become a game of survival and power struggles. Again, middle managers deal with such anxieties differently. Some dive into the game and visibly compete and some prefer to play politics while others turn into spectators or commentators, claiming to know it all but speaking only behind doors. Moreover, I also identified a subgroup of those who do not engage in fights but use a “sublimation” defense mechanism by channeling their frustrations and anxieties into doing something useful (De Vries, 2004). The following stories illustrate such types.

It is a Jungle; Sharpen Your Weapon. One leader described the scene from above without apparent understanding regarding what lies below the surface: “Decisions are not taken until escalated to the top leadership. Managers do not know how to discuss work with each other.” A middle manager used a rationalization to explain why he believed other managers did not collaborate in sharing information with each other: “Information is too confidential even it isn’t. It is a power and favors-trading play.” One manager explained it as follows: “a manager who needs information from another department would send an official letter to get it, rather than take the information from the system. The reason is that, in case something goes wrong, the responsibility goes on the other manager, and the written letter would be the evidence.” However, the most articulate manager mentioned that, “departments are like countries. There are boundaries and language constraints. You need a passport to get in. If you have a long-term interest in a department, you had better have an ambassador. A few spies won’t hurt either!”

I Know it All, but I Prefer to Watch. I observed that some managers choose to stay off the field. They avoid key meetings. When they attend, they do not contribute. By all means, they avoid presenting or otherwise occupying any kind of spotlight. I found it surprising that when I met such managers outside meetings, each claimed to know the whole system’s key issues and had the ultimate solution to fix them. But no one wants to listen. It seemed more like an autistic fantasy.

Found my Releasing Punch-Bag. A sub-group of the avoidance managers employed yet another solution for their anxieties. They adopted more of a sublimation defense mechanism, according to which they avoided the playing-field but channeled their anxieties regarding the political environment toward doing something useful. One manager described what he was doing as follows: “I found this whole system toxic. I learned not to get involved anymore. So, I focused on developing myself. I attended every possible training and stayed persistent until I got my Ph.D.”

Theme #4 – Defense Mechanisms against Anxieties Driven by Relationship with the Task

A fourth source of anxiety for middle managers is their perception of the task they are responsible to deliver. Managers deal with this anxiety differently. Many run after what is being measured despite if that led them to be on-task, off-task or at times even anti-task. Some consider the task from only an internal perspective without giving much attention to the beneficiaries or customers to be served. This approach helps them appear busy all the time. The focus is on the show-and-tell celebrations and committees rather than on doing the task. Other managers were not even bothered with this. They simply did not care about the task. Many even felt entitled to the pay and benefits whether they did something or not. The following stories illustrate this theme.

What Gets Measured becomes the Task. People in general, and managers in particular, are highly influenced by what gets measured despite the goal. Most of the time, this is because of a lack of knowhow rather than due to ill intentions (Spitzer, 2007). I observed a meeting in which a public sector manager presented the results of government inspections related to retail violation revenue. He then linked the measurement to compliance with retail policy standards. When asked what the percentage of compliance was, he did not know, nor did he seem to care. The fact that it was not measured seemed rationalization enough. The amount of revenue was celebrated because it was measured, while compliance, which is supposedly the real goal, was not measured and therefore not discussed.

It is Easy: Let us Create One More Sub-Committee. Another observation is related to intense bureaucracy and lack of accountability for many managers. Many managers complained that decision-making takes a long time. People do not seem keen to make decisions. One manager spoke as follows: “For every challenge, leadership proposes to form committees to review and recommend. Then they usually form sub-committees to formulate second opinions. It is a long cycle.” It seemed to me that many of the managers were already aware of the challenge and expressed a desire for the optimizing processes. However, I felt that they still did not want to be responsible for decisions. They complained about the process, but they also did not seem keen to change it either. The notion of forming committees and doing reviews again and again seems satisfying enough despite taking them off-task.

It is All About the Show. For some other managers, getting work done was all about what's on the show. They appear to be diligent but in reality neglect the real task. I attended many organizational events and workshops in which I noticed that they tend to focus more on logistical issues than on the task to be achieved. For example, meetings and committees spend a lot of time and energy discussing the logistics of workshops rather than the content. Things like the hotel, seating arrangements, type of food and giveaways take up more time than discussing what should be presented, agreed upon and accomplished. Often the discussion of content is superficially reviewed and delegated to the front liners. In the end, the success of such events is celebrated on the basis of logistical matters. Few seemed to be bothered that nothing concrete was achieved.

Do You Know Who I am? Another group of managers seemed to deal with their anxieties via denial and entitlement. An active leader complained about this attitude from managers: "People feel entitled to a job and a salary from the government and do not see a need to perform. If you ask someone to do a task, it comes as if you are punishing him." One manager, who felt entitled, explained it like this: "The real truth is that employees just need to show up and achieve a good performance rating. This is government money, and no one has the right to withhold that from any citizen."

Discussion

In this section, I attempt to synthesize all the stories I have heard or observed into a meaningful framework that can help bring the findings together. I found it useful to use Anderson and Adams' (2019) work on the three primary reactive tendencies (comply, protect, and control). I summarized the stories and observations that I had collected from the field on sticky notes and identified the key themes. Thereafter, I organized them as depicted in Figure 5.

On the X-axis (horizontal) I have listed the three reactive tendencies of Anderson and Adams. On the Y-axis (vertical) I listed the four sources of anxiety I identified, see Figure 4 above. For each theme, I used four types of sticky notes, each a different color. In green, I wrote a title for the theme. In yellow, I summarized behaviors I had observed or heard. In pink, I articulated the defense mechanisms that were described. Finally, in sky blue, I wrote down the reference numbers for the stories. The writing of the stories, structured according to Schein's (2017) description of the three levels of organizational culture, can be found in Appendix 2.

Figure 5

Analysis of the stories split by four sources of work anxiety vs. three reactive types of organizational defense mechanisms

Legend	1 Comply Move with/ toward		2 Protect/ Freeze/ Disengage Move away		3 Control/ Fight Move against	
	17 stories		13 stories		26 stories	
Superiors	Luck Favors the connected MM Follow the alphas Identification with the aggressor + Transference (mirroring + idealization) 6 + 7 + 31 + 40	No free lunch! Leaders claim to help with extra capacity (planting spies), Explaining P&P or vague direction (pass blame) Reaction Formation 10 + 12 + 16	Diluting failure! Continuous Change of Org structure or leadership + vague Displacement + chasing a phantasmic object 21 + 22	Delegate up! Delegation to superiors (No Acct) Dependency + Fear 2 Catch me if you can! Treat me like a child and I will act accordingly Projective Identification + regression + Acting out 4 If you don't sail, you won't sink! MM Hide + Sick Leave + Avoid taking leadership Rationalization + Somatization + Flight 3, 22	Like an airplane in traffic jam! MM untrusting, treated as children. They retaliate with passive aggression Passive aggression 8	It's one-way street - Do it or else! Military, aggressive and language attitude & threats evoking fear and demanding unquestioned obeying Narcissist + Fear + Passive aggression + Identification with the aggressor 30 + 5 + 9 + 20 + 23 + 38
Subordinates	Buying loyalty! They will do nothing until I give them goodies: overtime, international training (touristic) Projection 37 + 34	Superficial Harmony! Avoid giving negative feedback Avoidance, Negative feedback can break trust & relations vs. build them 13 + 17			Control, pressure and keep them in the shadows! Prevent talented line staff visibility in front of top leaders Rationalization, Identification with aggressor, Displacement, Fear 1, 18, 41	Let's call them something else! Use of language, Depersonalization, denial of the significance of the individual - Official Letters, cases During evaluations, we call people cases! His Excellency, Engineer 43
Peers	Artificial Harmony! Avoid giving negative feedback, collaborate, give favours & agree to powerful peers Power struggle 2+ 17 + 13	I know it all, but I prefer to watch! No contribution in meetings, just behind doors claim to have the solutions to all problems Autistic Fantasy 32	At least I am learning! Hunt trainings and certifications Sublimation 14, 42		It is a game of power! Political Competition for Grades, positions, and power. No real collaboration - letters back/forth Passive aggression + Devaluation (of others) + Me-ness 2+ 15+ 17+ 26 + 29 + 19 + 38 + 39 + 23?	
Tasks	It is all about winning internally! Internally focused Isolation? 24 + 35 + 36 + 34	It is all about the show! Luxury offices and food, cameras and speakers, social media coverage, mega screens 28	Let's create a subcommittee! Decisions are shifted to committees Bureaucracy & lack of accountability Rationalization 27	I don't care! Passive connector up & down Isolation 11	It is about what gets measured! What gets measured gets done Rationalization + Identification with the aggressor 14+ 17 + 33	I am entitled! Do minimum I am entitled (BA Purty!) + Denial 19 + 25 + 32

Figure 5 illustrates many common results of the analysis performed. It was surprising to me to see how rich and comprehensive the stories were across all three reactive tendencies and four sources of anxiety. Another finding was that 26 stories were collected under the reactive control defense, more than under the other two types. This gives an indication of the smell of the whole environment.

To put the findings from the analysis into practice, I have summarized them in Table 2. I captured the relevant defenses identified in the field analysis under each of the three reactive tendencies. In doing so, I included both mature and immature examples of the identified defense mechanisms. In performing this step, I realized that each defense has a positive aspect. Ultimately, every defense mechanism – or immunity to change – has a noble protective purpose (Kegan, & Lahey, 2001). For example, people who mirror their superiors with a 'compliance' defense may have strong social and emotional skills that also enable them to be loyal, and to believe in the vision of the organization. A detached, critical person with the 'protection' defense might possess the qualities of reflection and wisdom and be able to pinpoint strategic risks. Finally, a person with the tendency to 'control' might bring the gifts of vision, courage and grit.

Table 2

Summary of defense mechanisms against three reactive tendencies to anxiety triggers

Reactive Tendency	Comply	Protect	Control/ Fight
Energy Direction	Move with/ toward	Move away	Move against
Primary Emotion	Fear	Disgust	Anger
Want/ Need	To be liked	To be right	To be recognized
Identity	<i>Security (I am loved)</i>	<i>Self-worth (I am smart)</i>	<i>Achievement (I am great)</i>
Behaviours:	Conform Please superiors Stick to procedures Passive	Disengage Disapprove Critical Act ego-centric	Overstretch Aggression Don't listen Disempower
Defense Mechanism (Immature)	Dependency Mirroring Idealizing Identification with the aggressor	Regression Rationalization Autistic Fantasy Displacement Detachment Projection	Depersonalization Devaluation Scapegoating Denial Splitting Reaction formation
Defense Mechanism (mature)	Suppression (+) Altruism (+)	Sublimation (+) Humor (+)	Curiosity (+)
Gifts, potential new story or positive angle	Loyalty Service Sensitivity to others Community builder focus Emotional intelligence	Detachment Wisdom Reflection Challenger Strength of character Lead from behind, not seeking credit	Continuous improvement Getting things done Longing for excellence High energy & drive Persistence Visionary

I think social systems, including organizations, need all kinds of these defense mechanisms and reactive tendencies to get the results they want. A group is potentially healthier and stronger in

the long run if it is endowed with conscious, creative, and diverse personalities that incorporate various human qualities such as collaboration, reflection, and courage. In Table 2, therefore, I have offered reflections on how each defense can also be perceived as a positive gift. I believe that social defenses are neither bad nor good; they are simply human reactions and energies that can be channeled in various ways.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations that should be taken into consideration. First, although organizational ethnography and the qualitative IPA approach allowed for a deep exploration, they lacked the potential to identify the quantitative aspects of generalizations, comprehensiveness, and causality. Second, the research setting offered many boundaries and restrictions. Saudi Arabia is currently passing through a unique change in its history. Also, I visited just four of few hundred public sector organizations within the country. I acquired access to these organizations by leveraging my daily consulting work and network. Knowledge of this might have influenced my interviewees. Furthermore, the interviewed subjects were mostly not randomly selected. They were nominated by executive leaders.

A third limitation is the potential bias of my own experience and interpretation. As a full-time consultant, my mind seeks problem-solving rather than reflection and deep listening. At times I found it difficult to stay within the problem space, and my mind was actively looking for solutions. At other times it related to the discussed challenges, as they evoked my personal defenses by recalling my days as a middle manager. Medico and Santiago-Delefosse (2014) argue that: “A researcher’s choices and interpretations are closely connected with personal experiences and academic history. The explicit objective of a reflexive position is to establish more clearly the researcher’s reality vis-à-vis the object of research and to increase the transparency of analysis development”.

Fourth, I realized in hindsight that my focus in the interview discussions was skewed more toward the negative challenges faced by middle managers vs. allowing equally balanced perspectives to be presented. I wonder if I did this because it provided an easier route to the hidden defense mechanisms. Also, I might have fallen into counter-transference bias due to preconceptions held by consultants, to emotional involvement with a segment of the subjects, or to playing the top-executive agenda (Czander & Eisold, 2003). Again, in hindsight I feel I could have been influenced in my analysis by such forces.

Finally, I wonder if the fact that I am a middle child could have influenced my choice to study middle managers or if it has affected how I interpreted their anxieties or defense mechanisms. Eckstein and others (2010) reviewed 200 birth-order studies from the literature. They

found that the middle child faces the greatest feelings of not belonging. I imagine that being a middle child brings its own mix of anxieties. One interesting observation that I identified in the review by Eckstein et al. is that 150 studies cited characteristics of first-born children, 65 studies cited the characteristics of the youngest child, while only 24 studies cited characteristics of middle children. It seems that both middle managers and middle children are relatively ignored in literature. I wonder if this has to do with the unattractiveness of the notion of the middle.

Future research

In this study, attention was focused on understanding defense mechanisms against anxiety among middle managers within the public sector. The study adopted a qualitative approach to achieve its desired aim. Potential future studies that can leverage the generated insights might include the following: First, a researcher might broaden the sources of qualitative insight to include the perspectives of front-line employees or customers. Second, a researcher could conduct the same study but in other settings (such as the private sector or in non-profit organizations) and compare findings.

Third, a future study could mix the methodology with quantitative approaches. Such an approach can facilitate generalization by choosing a representative sample from the target population. It can also encourage greater comprehensiveness by including the full range of anxiety triggers and defense mechanisms used by public sector middle managers. Moreover, a study may go further in the direction of causality and priority. A researcher may seek to identify which anxiety triggers are likely to cause which defense mechanisms. Also, a researcher may determine which defense mechanisms affect the organizational task the most.

Finally, one might move forward beyond the issue space to the solution space. For example, a researcher could try to identify effective interventions that can reduce each type and level of defenses against organizational anxiety. Alternatively, a researcher might get interested to focus a lens on the positives side, or the gifts of defense mechanisms.

Conclusion

I hope the key lesson of the story of the snake under the carpet (De Vairies, 2004), mentioned in the introduction, came to life throughout this thesis. As we saw in the story, all efforts to flatten the carpet failed until the person discovered the angry snake and removed it. The same is true of any human system. It rarely helps to address the symptoms. You can not bring about lasting change without uncovering and dealing with the hidden anxieties, fears, assumptions, and social defenses.

This thesis constitutes a psychodynamic inquiry into organizational anxieties from the perspective of middle managers. The study explored and described the types of defense mechanisms formed among middle managers in the Saudi public sector against sources of work anxiety. The primary objective was to identify insights that can be leveraged within the organizational-change literature in general and in the public sector in particular. My key research objectives are as follows: to identify the main sources and types of anxiety among middle managers in the Saudi public sector, to examine the behaviors and artifacts that emerge in response to these anxieties, and to investigate the underlying assumptions or organizational defense mechanisms, which are triggered by these anxieties.

To address these objectives, I began my work by reviewing the literature on the perspectives of middle management, the change context of the public sector, the Saudi aspirational Vision 2030, organizational anxieties, and types of defense mechanisms. Overall, there has been a limited attempt in the social-science literature to understand the lived experiences of the conflictual, complex, and vague world of middle managers (Azambuja & Islam, 2019). It is more common to label middle managers as the source of resistance to change (Huy, 2001).

However, successful organizational change requires a mass organizational scale of momentum to a tipping point (Gladwell, 2006), in which middle managers play a critical role. To reach the hearts and minds of middle managers, one must delve deeper into their worldviews, hidden anxieties, and defense mechanisms. Moreover, the literature gap became wider as the research came to focus on public sector organizations within Saudi Arabia. This is where the fieldwork helped.

The methodology of this study is qualitative: I used IPA and organizational ethnographic (accidental) approaches. Given the study aim and objectives, a qualitative methodology involving deep interviews and observations was found best suited to uncover such insights. However, this research methodology suffers from a number of limitations, including a convenient and non-random selection of individuals for interviews and my potential bias as a consultant, which may have influenced how I perceived and analyzed the data.

The research revealed many findings. Four key sources of anxiety among middle managers in the Saudi public sector have been identified. These are as follows: the relationship with superiors and top leaders, the expectations of subordinates, the tensions with rival peers, and the complexity of the tasks to be performed. It is worth noting that no claim is made here that these sources of anxiety are either mutually exclusive or comprehensively exhaustive. They are what emerged the most during the fieldwork. For each of the four sources of anxiety, examples of behaviors and artifacts that were shared by middle managers in the Saudi public sector were

grouped into coherent themes. Then, a deeper, night-vision lens was applied to analyze and uncover the hidden assumptions and defense mechanisms triggered by these themes.

After this, I used learnings from Anderson and Adams (2019), regarding the three reactive tendencies of comply, protect, and control to synthesize the stories I heard or observed into a meaningful framework. I found that middle managers responded with all types of reactive defenses against each of the four sources of anxiety. Moreover, the reactive defense of control emerged most frequently in the stories. This finding is not generalizable, however, given the qualitative approach of the study.

I ended the thesis by attempting to provide a practical summary of relevant defense mechanisms that can be used by organizational change practitioners. In this summary, I also included an opposing, exploratory view of what might be a positive side of these organizational defense mechanisms. For example, managers who used mirroring as a reactive, complying defense against controlling superiors also demonstrated a potential for social skills, loyalty, and a passionate belief in the organizational vision. From this it can be seen that defenses are neither bad nor good in themselves; they are merely human reactions and energies that can be channeled in one direction or another.

I believe that the concept of organizational defense mechanisms has much more to offer. Recognizing how and where such defense mechanisms develop can help people protect themselves from operating under these conditions (Krantz, 2010). This will add significant value to the well-being and growth of today's workforce.

I also shared some ideas for future studies. A researcher could expand the sources of qualitative findings to include other stakeholders' perspectives, conduct the same study in a different setting, mix the methodology with quantitative approaches to facilitate generalizations and discussions of causality regarding tasks, or, my preference, deepen our understanding of the gifts of social defense mechanisms.

One last thought: let me return to the Sufi story with which I began. Two people may see the snake under the carpet differently. One may fear the venom, which can be deadly, and the other may look forward to using the venom as a life-saving medicine. It is all a matter of perspective.

References

- Agostino, D., Arena, M., & Arnaboldi, M. (2013). Leading change in public organisations: The role of mediators. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 34(7), 596–615.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-12-2011-0123>
- Anderson, R. J., & Adams, W. A. (2019). *Scaling leadership: Building organizational capability and capacity to create outcomes that matter most*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Aroles, J. (2020). Ethnographic encounters: Towards a minor politics of field access. *Culture and Organization*, 26(1), 48–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2018.1443103>
- Azambuja, R., & Islam, G. (2019). Working at the boundaries: Middle managerial work as a source of emancipation and alienation. *Human Relations*, 72(3), 534–564.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726718785669>
- Barrett, J. R. (2007). The researcher as instrument. *Music Education Research*, 9(3), 417–433.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14613800701587795>
- Bucy, M., Finlayson, A., Kelly, G., & Moye, C. (2016, May 9). *The 'how' of transformation*. McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/the-how-of-transformation>
- Czander, W., & Eisold, K. (2003). Psychoanalytic perspectives on organizational consulting: Transference and counter-transference. *Human Relations*, 56(4), 475–490.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726703056004004>
- De Metz, N., Davis, A., & Surju, J. (2020). The strategising roles of public sector middle managers. *Acta Commercii*, 20(1), Article 804. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ac.v20i1.804>
- De Vries, M. K. (2004). Organizations on the couch: A clinical perspective on organizational dynamics. *European Management Journal*, 22(2), 183–200.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2004.01.008>
- De Vries, M. K., & Balazs, K. (2005). Organizations as optical illusions. *Organizational Dynamics*, 1(34), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2004.11.006>
- Eckstein, D., Aycock, K. J., Sperber, M. A., McDonald, J., Van Wiesner III, V., Watts, R. E., & Ginsburg, P. (2010). A review of 200 birth-order studies: Lifestyle characteristics. *Journal of Individual Psychology*, 66(4), 408–434. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2011-09629-007>
- Foster, A. (2013). The challenge of leadership in front line clinical teams struggling to meet current policy demands. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 27(2), 119–131.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2013.798147>
- Fujii, L. A. (2015). Five stories of accidental ethnography: Turning unplanned moments in the field into data. *Qualitative Research*, 15(4), 525–539.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794114548945>

- Giauque, D. (2015). Attitudes toward organizational change among public middle managers. *Public Personnel Management*, 44(1), 70–98.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0091026014556512>
- Gjerde, S., & Alvesson, M. (2020). Sandwiched: Exploring role and identity of middle managers in the genuine middle. *Human Relations*, 73(1), 124–151.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726718823243>
- Gladwell, M. (2006). *The tipping point: How little things can make a big difference*. Little, Brown and Company.
- Gutmann, D. (1993). Reduction in the effectiveness of social systems as a defense against anxiety. *Journal of Career Development*, 20(1), 85–89.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/089484539302000110>
- Hamel, G. (2011). First, let's fire all the managers. *Harvard Business Review*, 89(12), 48–60.
- Han, Y., Wang, M., & Dong, L. (2014). Role conflict and the buffering effect of proactive personality among middle managers. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 42(3), 473–486.
<https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.2014.42.3.473>
- Harding, N., Lee, H., & Ford, J. (2014). Who is 'the middle manager'? *Human Relations*, 67(10), 1213–1237. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726713516654>
- Huy, Q. N. (2001). In praise of middle managers. *Harvard Business Review*, 79(8), 72–79.
- Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. L. (2001). The real reason people won't change. *HBR's 10 Must Reads on Change*, 77.
- Khaleelee, O. (2010). From autonomy to dependency? *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, 26(2), 213–218. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0118.2010.01175.x>
- Kotter, J. P. (2012). *Leading change*. Harvard Business Press.
- Kotter, J. P., & Cohen, D. S. (2002). Creative ways to empower action to change the organization: Cases in point. *Journal of Organizational Excellence*, 22(1), 73–82.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/npr.10055>
- Krantz, J. (2010). Social defences and twenty-first century organizations. *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, 26(2), 192–201.
- Little, J., Blackman, P., & Rouhan, J. (2001). Social policy and humanity: The use of language as a social defence against anxiety. *Australasian Psychiatry*, 9(4), 317–320.
<https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1440-1665.2001.00357.x>
- Medico, D., & Santiago-Delefosse, M. (2014). From reflexivity to resonances: Accounting for interpretation phenomena in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 11(4), 350–364. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2014.915367>

- Menzies, I. E. (1960). A case-study in the functioning of social systems as a defence against anxiety: A report on a study of the nursing service of a general hospital. *Human Relations*, 13(2), 95–121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872676001300201>
- Meško, M., Erenda, I., Videmšek, M., Karpljuk, D., Štihec, J., & Roblek, V. (2013). Relationship between stress coping strategies and absenteeism among middle-level managers. *Management: Journal of Contemporary Management Issues*, 18(1), 45–57. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/104237>
- Mintzberg, H. (2009). Rebuilding companies as communities. *Harvard Business Review*, 87(7–8), 140–143.
- Pietkiewicz, I., & Smith, J. A. (2014). A practical guide to using interpretative phenomenological analysis in qualitative research psychology. *Psychological Journal*, 20(1), 7–14. <https://doi.org/10.14691/CPPJ.20.1.7>
- Schein, E. H. (2017). *Organizational culture and leadership* (5th ed.). John Wiley & Sons.
- Sherwood, M. (1964). Bion's experiences in groups: A critical evaluation. *Human Relations*, 17(2), 113–130.
- Sims, D. (2003). Between the millstones: A narrative account of the vulnerability of middle managers' storytelling. *Human Relations*, 56(10), 1195–1211. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00187267035610002>
- Sims, R. R. (Ed.). (2010). Change (transformation) in government organizations. *IAP*.
- Spitzer, D. R. (2007). *Transforming performance measurement: Rethinking the way we measure and drive organizational success*. Amacom Books.
- Tuckett, D., & Taffler, R. (2008). Phantastic objects and the financial market's sense of reality: A psychoanalytic contribution to the understanding of stock market instability. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 89(2), 389–412. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-8315.2008.00040.x>
- Whitehurst, J. (2015, May 28). Despite what Zappos says, middle managers still matter. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2015/05/despite-what-zappos-says-middle-managers-still-matter>
- Yu, M.-C. (2009). Employees' perception of organizational change: The mediating effects of stress management strategies. *Public Personnel Management*, 38(1), 17–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009102600903800102>

Appendix 1

Deep Structured Interview Discussion Guide

I followed the following line of script and questions for my IPA interviews:

- I introduce myself
- Explain my objectives
- Reassure participant regarding confidentiality, and obtain permission to take notes and to include anonymous quotes in my research where appropriate
- Q. Who are you as a person? What do you consider important in life? And in work?
- Q. Describe the work culture here.
- Q. What are the key strengths of the culture? What gives you energy? I probe for behaviors, thoughts, feelings, underlying assumptions, values, needs, and potentially defense mechanisms.
- Q. What are the key culture challenges? What drains your energy? I probe for behaviors, thoughts, feelings, underlying assumptions, values, needs, and potentially defense mechanisms.
- Q. If you had a magic wand, what one thing you would change? From what to what? Why?
- I offer my appreciation.

Appendix 2

	Title/ Theme	Artefacts (Behaviours & Observations)	Espoused Beliefs and Values (Thoughts, Feelings & Values)	Taken-for-Granted Underlying Basic Assumptions (Mindsets, Beliefs, Needs & Fears)	Quotes
1	Leaders fear giving MM exposure to the Top leader not to replace them	Many (N- (1-2)) leaders don't take vacations. If they take, they only take short periods and avoid setting up any one in their place. If they are needed, they would cut their vacations. Many (N- (1-2)) leaders avoid giving their MM opportunities to present in key meetings unless there are issues to explain	- I am committed - I am the only one with needed level of insights	Leaders fear that hidden talents below them will impress the higher leader and may end up replacing them eventually	"Talented MMs don't get exposure nor recognition in front of top leadership. If they do, they know they can be replaced next day" <i>Senior leader</i>
2	MM & (N-(1-2)) Delegate upward decision-making and avoid accountability not to be exposed to risks	Many MM and (N- (1-2)) resist taking ownership or accountability for decisions. They would ask superiors for giving directions.	- I follow policy & regulations - Taking decisions is the job of a leader - Better be safe than sorry	- Not worth the risk - Anti-corruption authority have done a great job in fighting corruption. However, it went to the other extreme paralysing employees from taking decisions	"decisions are not taken until escalated to the top leadership. Managers don't know how to discuss work with each other" <i>Leader</i> "You feel people are just waiting for me to make a mistake and... boom... hell gets loose, I get investigated like a criminal with no one protecting me" <i>Manager</i> "We see anti-corruption people dragging managers every day for investigations. People talk behind you even if you are totally innocent, it is an image game. It is not worth the risk. I am certainly not paid enough for that. Leave it to those powerful leaders to sign" <i>Manager</i>
3	MM avoid taking leadership positions as rewards don't equal the risks associated	Some MM Resist to take higher leadership positions, claiming to be sick or having personal circumstances.	- Fulfilling other priorities in life	- Too risky/ not enough reward - Lose-Lose situation	"If I take a leadership position, I will be sandwiched between two evils. Resist orders from superiors to break the low and risk being blacklisted, overlooked for promotions or potentially relocated to middle of no-where. If I just do what I am asked, I risk being investigated by anti-corruption authorities and potentially major reputation damage and even jail time" <i>Manager</i>
4	MM use organizational time and assets for personal use as payback for injustice they faced	Many MM do personal work during working hours, or utilize organizational assets for personal use	I am not hurting anyone	Payback for the injustice I faced	"I used my own time and assets (car) to do organizational work with no compensation or not even "Thank you". It is fair to do the other way around" <i>Manager</i>
5	MM follow orders from superiors out of fear of punitive retaliations	Many MM follow orders from superiors without enough discussion	Boss knows best	- Discussing will not change the boss' opinion - Arguing might hurt me back	"If I don't do it I risk punitive retaliations (transfer to a remote area, overlooked for promotions or raise, etc)" <i>Manager</i>
6	Luck (promotions, pay raise, etc) favours the	Many MM won't try to stretch their performance and do anything beyond what is	- I have more important things in life	Who I know matters more	"Just do minimum needed. At the end of the day, life is short and over here, promotions and grades are

	connected not the high performer	required and beyond working hours	– I don't want to step into anyone's shoes	than the value of what I do	based on who is your friend up there, you know what I mean!)” <i>Manager</i>
7	MM form buddy groups with strong leaders for mutual benefits	MM stay in the teams of strong leaders as friendly allies and close acquaintances. As friends, the boss will trust that we will cover him/her for going around rules and regulations when needed. In exchange, the boss will reward us for a slice of the cake, and push for positive evaluations and promotions	– Strong leaders who are friends will go extra miles in protecting my interests in the organization – You can trust the people you know more	– It is a win-win relationship. – Your friends won't stab you in the back during tough times	“People feel they need to pick sides in order to survive around here. Most want to follow the strongest leaders who can bring the goodies to their teams” <i>Manager</i> “Today, only few leaders are strong and able to show the work of their teams and stand behind them. Everyone wants to work with them. You would feel recognized, proud and supported. However, with the weak leaders, people will be lost and run over” <i>Manager</i>
8	MM not trusted and measured by signing-in and out (like children)	All employees need to prove attendance all day long by clocking in/out 5 times a day	We follow the rules and regulations	– People hated it, but were forced to do it. – People found ways to retaliate – If they don't trust me, I will act accordingly – If they treat me like a child, I will act childish	“75% of employees sign in the morning and leave their offices” <i>Leader</i> “With ultimate focus on signing in/out as a measure for performance we became like an air plane driving in highway traffic!” <i>Manager</i> “People retaliated by doing nothing else but sign-in/ out” <i>Manager</i> “employees used all possible excuses to break out of the building even if they didn't need to. For example, most asked for excuses to leave early to in order to pick their children from schools. The funny thing, many of them didn't even have children!, with a laughter 😊” <i>Manager</i>
9	MM need to do what the leader says not what the job description entails	MM Job titles don't reflect what they actually do on ground	It can't be fixed, this is how the system has been historically	It doesn't matter what is my job title, I just do what my manager asks me to do!	“There is no match between job title and qualifications. You typically find someone with a BS degree in business having a job title of plumper” <i>Manager</i> “It is unacceptable that we have people with high-school qualifications leading people with BS and Master degrees. Leadership positions should be given to qualified people not friends” <i>Manager</i>
10	Leaders want to pass the blame for mistakes to MM by sharing policies and procedures	Leaders read all memos in the weekly meeting to MM	To help managers and employees better understand intent of memos	Appearing in helping capacity, but reality want to ensure a full case for blaming, just in case	“I just wanted to put in record that they were properly informed about these policies. So, they can't deny knowing later-on when they get caught making mistakes” <i>Leader</i>
11	There is a drive for centralizing decisions at the top making MM role not meaningful	Withdraw decision making authorities from MM to top leadership. This seems to demotivate MM.	Centralization	Lack of trust from leaders on MM's capabilities	“The athlete who doesn't use his legs for years can hardly walk! Decision are only taken at the top table” <i>Manager</i>
12	Leaders plant spies in MM departments	MM are asked to assign an employee in their departments	– Agility – External expertise to help	– Lack of trust – A spy to leak insights	“Leaders don't trust us. They penetrate the lines of MM through

		for the senior leader to have direct access to. Leaders bring in contractors or hire deputy managers from their network within MM departments.	– Juniors to be apprenticed	– I will be replaced!	assigning their own people or use contractors” <i>Manager</i>
13	Feedback breaks trust & relations vs. build them	MM are not getting real Feedback on their performance. When they do, it is done/taken personally!	Don’t want to break the relations	– A belief that confronting real issues and sharing candid feedback may ruin relations – Feedback breaks relations and evokes personal issues and inconvenience	“we are a culture of large families and tribes; therefore, we need to be nice to each other. We can’t just give bad performance feedback, otherwise you develop a reputation of a bad person, and no one wants that! The word travels beyond work”. <i>Manager</i>
14	MM attend Trainings not related to their job nature to get promotion points	MM Attend trainings (absent minded) as they are not related to their job nature.	Learn and grow	Training is irrelevant, but needed as a mean for promotion and vacation	“Trainings are needed to tick the box for performance evaluation and promotion criteria, and also to take few days off from work” <i>Leader</i> “Not enough trainings. Budgets are spent in leadership touristic travel in the name of trainings and conferences” <i>Manager</i>
15	MM avoid sharing knowledge fearing to lose power or face	MM don’t share information with each other, only minimum required. You can hardly find accessible accurate and recent information.	– Need to guard information – Can’t share without an ask from my boss	Information gives me power and makes me feel needed	“Some managers don’t share information because they fear to be exposed or held accountable if it was wrong or challenged” <i>Leader</i> “Some managers don’t share information, just to show they are important” <i>Manager</i> “Information is too confidential, even if it isn’t. In reality, it is a power and favors trading game” <i>Manager</i>
16	Leaders give vague directions to MM to avoid blame if things go wrong	Leaders give tasks and orders via official letters to MM with only high level directives but no clear instructions (e.g. for action or do what’s needed, ..etc)	– Sharing official letters is professional – We have experience in doing what is needed	– The leader doesn’t know what needs to be done – By not being specific, the leader avoids to be blamed if things go wrong later on	“Leaders give vague directions, they don’t have time to discuss or explain, and they don’t support or protect when things go wrong. But they expect a perfect execution!” <i>Manager</i> “We don’t have institutional strategies, but more personal agendas and aspirations! It is sad that with every new Leader comes a completely new strategy & direction for the organization appears” <i>Manager</i>
17	MM Superficial Harmony - don’t collaborate with each other. All work is done through official Letters between departments for power and protection	MM don’t collaborate with each other. Everything needs to be acquired via official letters. Although, information is available in the organizational system.	Information received via official letters have more credibility as it is accurate and recent. Also, can be referenced if a dispute happens between departments	– Processing official letters is how performance is measured – Keeping records for the rainy day – Information is power	“Off course we need the official letters between departments, otherwise how can we measure our performance! Basically, how many letters have you processed!” <i>Manager</i> “Keeping documentation is critical for protection. You never know when a paper trail is needed” <i>Manager</i> “Information is power, you don’t just give it like this. You would

					want to ask for favours in exchange” <i>Manager</i>
18	MM unfairly treated, pressured to work extra hours without proper or timely compensation	MM are sometimes pressured to work extra hours or during their off days due to urgent work requirements. However, not properly or timely compensated.	It is ok to exceptionally work additional hours to support the organization	It is not ok, no work should be done without proper compensation.	“Leaders pass the pressure to MM to work extra hours or during their off days due to urgent crisis or work requirements. The same leadership is fast to blame if we don’t respond, but slow to process our compensations or reward us when we do” <i>Manager</i>
19	Performance Evaluation has no relation with daily work and everyone is entitled for high performance	Performance measurement doesn’t connect with MM responsibilities and work nature	If you do what is expected, then you are entitled for high performance rating	As citizens, it is our right to get promotions and salary increases, despite of work performance	“I just need to show up and do something useful to get high performance rating. This is government money and no one has the right to withhold that from any citizen” <i>Manager</i> “I never understood the performance measures, they have nothing to do with my work nature. I don’t feel my boss understands them either. It is one of those HR driven pains with hidden agendas” <i>Manager</i> “They told me we have to give your colleague an excellent rating this year, because he is due for promotion! But why at my expense, I worked harder all year long!” <i>Manager</i>
20	One way street on ideas – top-down. MM fear to speak-up	Communication and ideas mainly come top-down. Not much innovation bottom-up. Managers react to what leaders ask, ‘Yes Sir’ attitude is common.	– Just do what you need to do. – Don’t offend others	– My voice does not matter – Leaders take ideas for change as a personal attack	“It doesn’t matter to speak up or not. Leaders won’t truly hear anyway. You might also get in trouble for stepping on a wrong person’s shoes” <i>Manager</i>
21	Belief Changing Org. Structure is the solution	Frequent changes in org structure or missing an Org Structure to start with	– Agility to adapt to external and internal changes – Attributing failures to org structure	– Belief in a magical "proper structure" – Changing Org structure to fit leaders rather than the other way around	“We don’t have talented leaders. In search for talents, it is ok to do trial/ errors and change the Org. Structure based on what I observe of people skill and well” <i>Leader</i> “Many gov’t entities don’t have org charts, JDs, “No corporate path, targets, performance appraisals” <i>Manager</i>
22	Belief Firing the coach is the solution to the execution challenges	Frequent changes to department heads and managers	– Difficult to find the right talents – Giving opportunities to more talents	Attributing failures to department heads capabilities	“I don’t want to show my new title on business cards or at the door. I could be replaced any day, and it would be embarrassing!” <i>Manager</i>
23	No meeting rooms within departments indicating no need for discussions	Office layout doesn’t show meeting rooms within departments	Meeting rooms can distract from focusing on work	Follow directions from superiors. No need for discussion.	“Why do we need meeting rooms! They are potential places for gossiping and conspiracy!” <i>Manager</i>
24	Inward focus – that is all what really matters	Stopped beneficiaries (citizens or private sector) from entering the building. Not enough attention to what the customers need. Significant employee energy is spent on understanding what the internal leaders want, managing the ongoing changes, ad hoc	Need to focus on work.	Be safe by focusing on what the boss needs	“Despite all the changes, we are still doing the same work we did 10 years ago!” <i>Manager</i> “Sorry to say that, but dealing with customers can be a waste of time. Our customers don’t understand and appreciate 50% of our output.

		requests and worrying about their place in the hierarchy.			We need to focus on work” <i>Manager</i>
25	Do minimum, I am entitled for the job and pay by the government – I can’t be fired	Do minimum required to maintain position and to get promoted	We are entitled for the job, growth and benefits from our government	A belief that I am entitled for the job and pay by the government. No one and nothing can stop that. So let me put my energy somewhere else other than day-work	“One manager made a complain of not getting promoted, while only had actual work days of 32 days in a year!” <i>Leader</i> “People feeling entitled for the job and salary from the government, and not feel a need to perform. If you ask someone to do a task, it comes as if you are punishing him” <i>Leader</i>
26	Faceless – hunting next grade	Introduce themselves by Name & grade. Career path that doesn’t seem logical...	Higher grades means growth	The higher the grade the more Power and income	“It is a rat race for hunting next grade where power and income are expected. It doesn’t matter what function or location, as long as the next grade is secured” <i>Leader</i>
27	Decisions are shifted to committees Bureaucracy & lack of accountability	Many managers complained that decision-making takes a long time. People didn’t seem keen to make decisions.	Decision making is the responsibility of leadership	Avoid making decisions. It is too risky	“Senior executives are taking all the responsibilities and headaches, while managers are crossing their legs and waiting” <i>Leader</i> “If a mistake happens, then there is a lot at stake. It is my reputation” <i>Manager</i> “For every challenge, leadership proposes to form committees to review and recommend. Then they usually ask to form sub-committees to put in second opinions. It is a long cycle” <i>Manager</i>
28	Luxury environment is the sign of quality execution	location of the workshop was in a fine 5-star hotel, with great food and luxury gifts and giveaways on the tables, and 5-6 cameramen with high tech stuff and mega large screens	Professional logistics is a sign of great team and work behind it	What is visible, not necessarily on-Task, to superiors gets most attention	meetings and committees spend most of review time and energy on locations between fine 5-star hotels, who will set where, ensuring fine food, luxury gifts and giveaways on the tables, with many professional cameramen and presenting on mega large screens. When the content discussion comes, it gets superficially reviewed and mostly delegated to front liners to get the pages ready. (<i>observation</i>)
29	Formal and political	Setting and tone of discussions were more formal	Formal setting and tone means a professional team behind it	Depersonalization allow for detachment	People address each other formally. Making sure to say titles before names “His excellency, doctor, engineer” <i>Observation</i>
30	Military language and attitude.!	Military like environments with unquestioned directives and harsh attitude go top/ down with signs of over control and bullying	Allows for speed and impact	Fear of challenge	“You can’t convince people, you have to shock them, use the authoritarian power. No room for disagreements and second thoughts. Look at Saudi Vision 2030, it was mainly series of shocks. There was no other way, the government could have done it!” <i>Leader</i> “If you are not a wolf, the other wolves will eat you” <i>Leader</i> I noticed a chain of commands and hierarchy. If the senior said something, others followed. I imagined and sensed a lot of

					bullying from senior physicians to junior ones and from those to nurses and technicians <i>Observation</i>
31	Broken Hiring systems	Hiring & staffing not based on competency/ capability, but more based on who knows who	Follow process and procedures	Giving favors to people you know gives you credit and future leverage	“People hire who they know because it is safer. It also give them great credit to be used in future, not only with the person hired but all his family as well” <i>Manager</i>
32	A belief that sharing ideas upward is pointless, no one would notice or care	There is a resistance to share ideas upward with leadership	Ideas are practiced on ground vs. shared or talked about	Fear of judgment of ideas shared	“It is frustrating how many times people offered ideas for improvements that were gone to waste. Leaders have their own views and are not interested to truly listen. So, why bother!” <i>Manager</i>
33	What gets measured gets managed	What gets measured gets noticed and eventually managed, even at the expense of the real Task.	Performance is primarily a function of measurement	My worth is a function of my perceived performance on visible measures	A manager presented an achievement from government inspections, in terms of revenues generated from retail violations. Then, he linked the measurement to an objective of retail compliance with policy standards. When he was asked what’s the compliance percentage achieved, he basically didn’t know, and sort of didn’t seem to care either. The justification of it wasn’t measured seemed enough rationalization. Hence, level of revenue was celebrated as it was measured while compliance, as supposedly the real Task, was not measured and hence not discussed. <i>Observation</i>
34	Clans or Gangs code of relations	The system is comprised of clans (groups) of leaders, managers and front liners who care after the interests of the group. If you dig deeper, you find mismatches in contracted project scopes managed by those groups vs. on ground reality. Seems this is how they break bureaucracy	Being politically smart and getting things done	Belief that that it is smart to find ways to get your needs fulfilled through finding holes in managed project scopes	“It is an interconnected puzzle. Say a manager needs a new monitor. It will take forever time and approvals. Hence, managers are expected to find solutions. It has been a traditional way to look into existing project scopes under the department and ask contractors for some changes (for example bring 5 workers instead of 10, but get paid for 10. The extra money would fund needed monitors and other office supplies). The bigger the project the bigger the needs that can be funded. Think cars. Now this is why, department heads need friend in their departments, so they will trusted to do what they are asked discreetly. In return, they get to enjoy recognitions and rewards. The stronger your clan or gang, the more goodies you would expect”
35	Internal focus – it is a jungle out there	A lot of power games between rivals at the same level. Significant energy gets wasted on internal politics and fights.	It is a power game. Need to be the best	Belief that a fight is needed and peers are out there to get you	“My friend, departments are like countries. There are boundaries and language constraints. You need a passport to get in. If you have a long-term interest in a department, you better have an ambassador. Few spies won’t hurt too!” <i>Manager</i>
36	Going off-task, blinded by internal focus and	Managers of systems are preoccupied with serving the internal staff and polishing their	– Staff first – Winning	Dehumanize beneficiaries	University management key meetings are focused more on

	external competitive appearance	image at the expense of doing the Task for their target beneficiaries			faculty needs vs. serving or attending to students. A university hires external researchers to publish research by the name of the university in order to improve its global ranking vs. building capabilities of internal researchers and demand better quality and quantity output. <i>Observation</i>
37	Buy team loyalty	Managers find ways to keep team happy and loyal, give low income civil jobs.	Support the team	Everyone is doing it. If I don't I lose my team	"In government, income is low while expenses are getting higher. Managers are finding creative ways to buy the loyalty of their teams. Examples include, guaranteed overtime, fake assignments out of city, luxury offsites and touristic trainings. Sometimes they for power moves, like formal hierarchy and titles or nicer offices" <i>Manager</i>
38	Hierarchy – The thrown chair	Power rank is established via environmental cues.	Professional and formal setting	Establish Hierarchy and power via context	Usually, the meeting rooms of the big bosses have sort of a thrown chair, where the most senior leader sets. The next in rank sets next, and so forth, often following assigned name tags with titles in front of each chair. A lot of attention and efforts are given to such protocols. <i>Observation</i>
39	Fear of being exposed	Avoiding speaking in public	Give opportunity to my team	Self-worth protection. Fear of making a public mistake	Many managers, no matter what, avoided presenting to the big boss. The idea of presenting in public was frightening to them. They insisted to stay safely invisible. <i>Observation</i>
40	Mirroring the boss	Managers mirror their superiors showing compliance	Keep the boss happy	Seeking safety and fear of not being liked	In many meetings, managers presented while carefully looking at the powerful leaders. It seemed like they were consistently reading cues from the leaders' facial expressions whether they should support an idea or not or even whether they should continue talking about it or not. <i>Observation</i>
41	Identification with the aggressor against subordinates	Some middle managers become an extension of their superiors' hostility. This way, they believe they can be accepted by their superiors.	Management of getting things done	Displacement & Identification with the aggressor: channel frustrations and energy from their superiors toward their subordinates to be more accepted by superiors	"I finished the presentation with everyone in my team hating me. I challenged and embarrassed them in front of the big boss. I felt the boss was proud of me. There is no place here for underdelivering" <i>Manager</i> "I forced the team either to achieve the target set by leadership or I will prevent them from participating in ..." <i>Manager</i>
42	Sublimation – MM response to peers	Disengaging from power struggles and investing time and real efforts in doing something positive, like trainings	Self-growth	Rechanneling bad energy into something positive	"I found this whole system toxic. I learned not to get involved anymore. So, I focused on developing myself. I attended every possible training and stayed persistent until I got my Ph.D. degree" <i>Manager</i>

43		Refraining from calling people (employees or customers) by their names and refereeing to them as cases	Being professional	Detachment and dehumanization via distancing	During employee evaluation process, I found committee members don't want to refer people by names and insisted to call them by case number. This evoked an association for me as how prisoners (in movies) are called by their numbers. <i>Observation</i>
----	--	--	--------------------	--	--