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Inconsistent Middle Manager Ethics: An Activity Based View of Interpretation and Expectation.

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Abstract

Non-routine events require organisations to respond to situations that are novel and unexpected. Such events present dilemmas as middle managers must often respond within timeframes that do not allow consultation or referral to more senior levels, yet in a way that is consistent with the organisations expectations of how they should respond. In the absence of precedent for guidance, managers must interpret the expectations of the organisation and its senior managers. This work undertakes a qualitative case study of multiple events using thematic analysis and highlights four main response types, each exemplifying a way which managers ethics are mobilized. Exploration of middle managers activity exposes the inconsistency that emerges because of these interpretations. This work contributes to the field of organisational ethics. It raises further considerations for those involved in managing ethics education in business schools; whilst also exposing potential difficulties for organisations due to inconsistent responses by middle managers.

Introduction

Ethics are increasingly recognised to be critical factors in an organisations sustainable and successful performance (Matten, Crane and Chapple, 2003; Thiel *et al.*, 2012). But, it is the un/ethical behaviour of managers in organisations that continues to come under scrutiny as they set the ethical tone in their respective firms (Trevino, Brown and Hartman, 2003; Kaptein, 2011; Treviño and Nelson, 2011). Numerous examples exist of management behaving un/ethically, from minor discrepancies such as lying to clients to protect the company's image (Umphress and Bingham, 2011), to wholesale major fraud, costing billions to rectify. It is therefore imperative that research understands the activities of middle managers contributions where ethics are concerned. As what has been done to date in terms of understanding ethical decision making and behaviour in the workplace has not created a shift in activity, but merely focused attention on the topic.

To date, behavioural ethics research has focused on two main areas. Firstly, the behavioural perspective, covering aspects such as identifying the determinants of un/ethical behaviour, ethical decision making, and what the macroeconomic influencing variables are (O'Fallon and Butterfield, 2005; Craft, 2013; Campbell and Göritz, 2014). Secondly, the education school; which focuses on ethics education and the training which managers receive during their years as students and managers in terms of ongoing personal and organisational development (Dean, Beggs and Keane, 2010; Sigurjonsson *et al.*, 2014; Jonson, McGuire and Cooper, 2016). Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe (2008) suggest that for theory development to occur there needs to be a focus on providing different platforms which allow for continued enhancement in the empirical work in behavioural ethics (Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe, 2008).

Performing their boundary spanning (Pappas and Wooldridge, 2007) role at such critical times means middle managers (Lüscher and Lewis, 2008; O'Brien, Scott and Gibbons, 2012; Day, 2013; Harding, Lee and Ford, 2014) are making multiple decisions and performing many micro activities. Their key role at the nexus of organisational activity exposes organisations to the implications and consequences of middle managers responses. Subsequently what managers attention (Ocasio, 1997; Hoffman and Ocasio, 2001) and their activity (Johnson, Melin and Whittington, 2003) is offers the opportunity to gain critical insight to how non-routine events are managed in the organisation. By their very nature non-routine events contain ethics, yet there is an absence of analysis on middle managers in the context of such events (Dean, Beggs and Keane, 2010); in particular research exploring managers' own experiences have received little attention (Huhtala *et al.*, 2013; Marsh, 2013; Hiekkataipale and Lamsa, 2016).

Gaining new insights using an alternative approach to collecting managerial recollections, this work addresses demonstrates that by understanding managerial activity in particular contexts new insights into managerial ethics can be induced. The research also demonstrates that the ethics training managers receive needs to re-consider what is occurring in organisations instead of prescribing a normative approach to ethical decision making; as a one size fits all approach has limitations. Thirdly, the work contributes new thinking to the recent questions posed in research such as 'what should a manager do in a situation'. These questions highlight the issues managers face when resolving dilemmas in the workplace (Hiekkataipale and Lämsä, 2015). Finally, there are implications for organisations if they fail to maintain and upskill their management in terms of how to address dilemmas when under pressure or that the opportunity for consultation with senior management is restricted.

Contextual Background

When non-routine events occur in organisations it is generally middle managers who are tasked with responding and finding solutions to them. To achieve this in ways that are both ethical and organisationally acceptable requires managers to make choices and resolve dilemmas. Middle manager responses to non-routine events must be recognised as construed of a complex range of interpretations. Alternative interpretations dominate the range of middle manager un/ethical actions and behaviours; and do so in several different combinations. Middle manager interpretations can be the result of interaction with a diverse realm of expectations, ethical triggers, and situational factors; such activity uncovers a mobilization of their ethics.

Ethics is best understood and theorized as a form of practice (Clegg, Kornberger and Rhodes, 2007); focusing on what managers do in their activities presents chances to expose complex cases of ethics and subsequent managerial responses. Rather than seeing ethics as a separate or bolted on aspect of managerial activity, ethics plays out via its embeddedness in all managerial action. Managers are continuously engaged in un/ethical activity as they are making choices, many of which are dilemmas. Dilemmas by their very nature involve ethics, perhaps not a choice between right and wrong, but a dilemma or choice between two or more rights. Many examples exist where managers find themselves tasked with resolving dilemmas. Innocuous situations such as interpreting how to respond to a customer's complaint, to perceived unreasonable requests from staff, to crafting a response to a senior manager they struggle to relate with all, require responses. In contrast, more serious examples also exist in high numbers, conflicts of interest, whether to share information with senior management, and whether to unintentionally act illegally for the right reasons. Either way the activity-based view offers a way to explore this and moreover uncover if inconsistency exists in the way these responses are activated.

Drawing from the activity-based view (Johnson, Melin and Whittington, 2003; Whittington, 2003) in conjunction with non-routine events provide such an alternative. Non-routine events, defined as 'something for which there is no predetermined response' (Nelson and Winter, 1982), exposes how middle managers via their micro activities and responses mobilize their ethics. No predetermined response exists for many non-routine events; and organisational codes and policies often fail to offer solutions due to being developed with routine organisational process and activity in mind. Concerned with the consequential details of organisational work and practice the activity-based view provides a platform to investigate what is done and by whom. Johnson et al (2003) suggest, understanding the more micro activity of managers allows for greater insights into the activities which constitute outcomes rather than reporting on what is generally going on (Johnson, Melin and Whittington, 2003).

Exposing inconsistency in managers responses may present a way to explain how they not only try to resolve a dilemma but also contrive ways to move on and enact business decisions. The activities of middle managers and their responses to non-routine events largely determine how other stakeholders perceive that organisation in those contexts. But, the complexity and numerous stakeholders involved in organisational events means managers are addressing one issue whilst presenting to a variety of audiences. The issue of serving two or more masters is raised by Perezts et al (2011) and highlights the common dilemma middle mangers face of trying to please everyone all the time. In times such as these, chronological pressures, contradictory logics (Pérezts, Bouilloud and de Gaulejac, 2011), and stakeholders with conflicting demands, often take managers attention. This in turn increases the likelihood of their having to find appropriate ways to deal with ethical issues and respond to dilemmas in ways which are acceptable to diverse groups (Janet *et al.*, 2000; Hiekkataipale and Lämsä,

2015). As Hiekkataipale & Lämsä (2015) argue, middle managers are caught between competing imperatives and bare responsible for many stakeholders.

The question of middle manager response consistency arises; individuals in business feel more secure if they experience consistency and routine in their daily activity. If managers are responding and presenting answers one way one day, and differently on another day how might this affect the relationship with stakeholders. Despite the many ethical decision making models in existence (Rest, 1984; Trevino, 1986; Jones, 1991), managers in challenging situations are often constrained by paradoxical, contradictory pressures, and dilemmas. Using the activity-based view and non-routine events and exploring middle managers responses to such situations offer a way to uncover how their ethics are mobilized and emerge in practice. But also, we are yet to know how consistent these responses are.

Research Design

This study uses an interpretivist approach to explore the recollections of middle managers involved in non-routine un/ethical events. Obtaining subjective meanings and understandings (Bryman & Bell, 2015) provides a way to generalise the mechanisms of interpretation middle managers apply when framing their responses to these phenomenon. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research topic (Creswell, 2007) and a lack of prior exploration.

Qualitative research seeks to explore and understand the underlying meaning that individuals or groups attribute to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2009). The purposive/theoretical sampling technique is a commonly used strategy in qualitative research, and within the business ethics research field, qualitative research is considered to be an important component (Lehnert *et al.*, 2016). The theoretical purposive sampling approach was selected as to offer heterogeneity and allow for cross sectional contextual approach. Heterogeneity in this study helps to provide evidence that findings are not solely the preserve of a specific group, time, or place. This can also help establish whether a theory developed in one context can be attributed to another (Robinson, 2014). Additionally, the aim of this study was to generate a varied sample of participants who have information about a particular phenomenon (Duberley, 2006), namely how middle managers respond to non-routine events.

To recruit the sample, the networks of the researcher and research school were approached as were other non-connected organisations. Networks and organisations were provided with a research brief, this presented an overview of the study, indications as to the topic of discussion during interviews, and offered clarity on issues related to research ethics, including anonymity and intellectual property. These inquiries yielded six organisations, two operating in the services sector, three operating in the product/services sector, and one product manufacturer; this resulted in thirty three semi-structured interviews taking place, of which in this paper we include 23 non-routine event cases. Whilst the number of interviews is not large, it is consistent with approaches to fine grained, in-depth inquiry (Sen and Cowley, 2013). Undertaking one-to-one interviews helped middle manager respondents comfort levels, and facilitated participants to introduce and reflect on issues and practices that they perceive as relevant to the research topic (Kvale, 1996).

Regarding middle managers responses on the ground, there were several dimensions of inquiry, firstly, what type of non/routine un/ethical events were managers describing. Secondly, what activities they were focused on and engaged in, along with explanations of what their role in the events. Thirdly, when managers were framing their responses to these events – from where they were drawing their interpretations, for example what did the top

management team or their senior managers expect them to. From one perspective managers may frame their responses directly on their interpretation of what they perceive seniors expect them to do. In contrast to this, individual values may influence the interpretations; as ones 'ethical register' may have a significant role in how we shape our knowledge of reality (Ezzamel and Willmott, 2014). In summary, it is important to uncover the influencing mechanisms of interpretation which middle managers draw from when framing their responses.

Data Collection

Within our multiple case study research design, we used a qualitative interpretive research approach. Interpretive research focuses on the complexity of human sense making as situations emerge (Kaplan and Maxwell, 1994), and to make meaning from inquiry a 'philosophy of interpretation' is assumed (Ricoeur and Kearney, 1996). This permits an opportunity to discover how people perceive, feel and experience the social world (Chen, Shek and Bu, 2011) and also abstract potential generalizable mechanisms of how managers are making their interpretations.

Data Analysis

First Order Codes	Second Order Codes (Managerial activity)	Coding on (Themes of managerial activity)
Putting combative measures in place.

We have to deep dive.

Implemented more controls.

I'd be looking for advice from people I could trust.

I had to deal with it and make sure it wasn't an issue afterwards.

Presented the information in a way that there was no questioning it.

Be the person who takes it by the scruff of the neck and deals with it.

You must delve deeper.

I will go out of my way to look at everything, so it doesn't bite us in the future.

I coaxed her into our trust and started to sow the seed that actually the problem might not be us and she did eventually acknowledge that. | Balancing, mediating, uncertainty around impacts, weighing up the impact. Balancing act, responding different ways, balancing the relationship, constrained whilst still managing performance and adherence to regulation, negotiating, doing the best with what we have, lots of balls in the air, we do what we need to do, diverge whichever way you need to. Coaxing trust, separating. You need to be pro-active, tread carefully.

Regular and common managerial activity. Everyday type management practice. | **Pro-active Response** |

You know it's a sort of balancing act, it is a balancing act. So there's a lot of balls in the air at the minute. I'm negotiating to try and get the capacity to offer supports. It's discussing, listening, and taking into consideration. So you position your best foot with the client but you also position the opportunity internally in the most flattering way. At the end of the day it's about meeting targets but I do that in lots of different ways. It is just pure negotiation, give them options, try to develop something that you know you can deliver. If you can negotiate around what the other individual needs to make themselves look good in their organisation you can help them look like a hero, so you have a better chance of being successful. It's about me making the best decision that has the least negative impact. I always try to get buy in from people. Give people the tools to make the right decision. It's about weighing up, you could have a multi-pronged see-saw, it's about trying to balance it. I would be flexible and work with them, but you've to be constantly talking to them, it's about keeping them focused.		**Pro-active Response**
There's always been a compromise between us. I don't have authority, but my input must go in from the very start. Dealing with my senior manager can be a bit of a struggle at times because he's set in what he wants and it's not physically possible. I've been told I'm a bit of a worrier and he can be a bit abrasive at times.	Defend, hold on to what you have. Point of departure is one of insecurity, apprehension, and anxiety about the relationship and how it is envisioned. It's about keeping the service afloat. Seek savings and maintain standards. I found it tough, as if my kingdom was being ripped apart, you feel a bit negative about that. I went through a period of	**Defensive Response**

You'll get a conversation sometimes which goes 'what the fuck are you doing, fix that and get the fucking thing right'. That's as much as you get. Now I have an issue because I tend to bring that home with me. So, you just don't know what you're going to get and you don't know the ferocity that it will be given to you. I have a wife and children at home and I hate bringing work crap home with me, it doesn't belong there. But it has affected me, I have gone home and been in a foul mood all weekend because of something that happened of Friday. Before I attempt to make any change, I'd get people together, I try to get them working with us from the start. There are things I'd prefer not to have to do, disciplinaries. I wish I didn't have to do them. So it's a matter of thinking and working it out, making sure the proposal is good and tight. You are mindful that what I say could make this situation worse. You must take the view that if you take the cut you can stay afloat. If I'm being honest it doesn't sound too bad but it took a lot out of me. I found that tough as a middle manager to, to understand why the company was doing this. I felt my kingdom was almost being, being ripped apart right so you feel a bit ermm, you feel a bit negative around that I suppose around that and those initial moves and stuff like that. So I, I probably found that quite hard because I suppose you get a little bit territorial in your view and, and this is my kingdom kind of thing. I suppose I went through that kind of denial, you know that defensive period.	denial. It's an ongoing fight. I can't find people to do it, it's just another thing I have to do day to day. Trying to second guess the boss, personally I have trouble with it, it affects my mood. You can't predict everything, but you just don't know what he's likely to come up with. Emphasis or focus is on the relationship and lacking attention towards the event.	**Defensive Response**
I know all the difficulties the staff perceive; the staff don't like that I'm tuned into them. I'd always be looking for them trying to avoid the difficult task.	Obtaining personal, situational, and organisational success. Change – being active about seeking necessary change. Managing reputation, being swift	

I'd be very proactive when staff are out, chasing them up to find out why and how long they're going to be out. I would never sit on the fence, I would be on top of my managers because of cultural things in this sector. I try to be ahead of the party, I'd be very conscious of not allowing patterns to be established. But now I'm checking out and making sure my back is covered as I'm refusing this for the first time in the organisation. I try to use a good moral base, I try to say to myself 'is this getting even', and you know sometimes I would want to get even but those kinds of decisions I'd leave until tomorrow. Now I know that individual is going to get annoyed and they're going to bring it to the unions and that will have a wider effect on the organisation. But nobody has ever confronted this issue. It's just not sustainable, it's crazy and an issue that needs to be addressed and the organisation is just being naïve in continuing as they do. But it is about winning and losing as well as doing the right thing. Yeah, I do believe if people aren't managed they will push their own agenda. I don't mind being the odd one out who'll call it, I've done it in lots of situations. I may not be the best at whinging to management, I'd be the kind of character who would just get on with it. I wouldn't persecute management and I suppose I should do that more. I look at a production line and think why are we doing it like that, it's something I am sort of tuned to. I'll talk it through with my colleague and bounce ideas of each other and come up with a plan and if it doesn't work we'll alter it again.	in responsiveness. Focus on organisational strategic objectives. We've policies, guidelines and strategies to cover everything. Be out there, more demanding, more active. Provide the evidence that you're being guided by. Drive responsibilities onto staff. We've had meeting with individual staff to ask them how they envisage the change, it's about working with people. It's about bringing the staff along and changing their attitude. I'll do so on my terms which are in the best interest of the organisation and best interests of service users. I was never afraid to tackle a problem. I try to use a good moral base, sometimes I would want to get even. We got involved because we manage facilities, there was a major investigation. I managed the internal and external communication around that. We would have preferred not to get involved. We acted fast, we certainly don't want to develop a reputation, we now have extra control measures, we can now say to the customer look, here are the steps we've taken, it shows the issue doesn't lie with us. We don't have room to fail; it's in our interest to maintain our reputation. I'm trying to repair the reputation with the customer, I'm doing 5 am starts with certain customers, making sure systems are okay. Opportunity spotting, recognising that there are benefits in non-	**Strategic Response** **Strategic Response**

We certainly don't want to get a reputation that we are the people causing the problem.

You need to be proactive, get in there first and show the customer you are taking things seriously. It's you that's driving the agenda, to say look this is what we are doing. It's about building up a case so that if there is an issue we can show it didn't lie with us.

I would make a point to focus on ensuring that service users received appropriate attention and that everything is done to meet their needs.

There's a bit of both, certainly morally but there are also consequences.

We got 2 weeks' notice that they were coming to inspect us so we had to make sure we had all the pieces in place.

The biggest challenge is to change staff attitudes. There are consequences in that if we don't change we will eventually fall. We are trying to transfer learnings and reconfigure what we are presently doing.

But one of the biggest things with policies is yes they're great, but sometimes people will use them to scupper something. | routine situations. Knowing how to manipulate this can be rewarding for all stakeholders | |
| The emergency was the emergency and that's what we're all about. My job is to respond to families in crisis so where was I going to leave him. That could have been the emotional end of our organisation as opposed to the legal end. We didn't think anything was wrong.

'We passed the customer on to the supplier which probably wasn't the best thing to do'. Supplier said it's nothing, customer was furious at suppliers' approach. I called our product recall department, but nobody wanted to take ownership.

We were not open enough in terms of how they wanted the business to go and a project team wasn't set up. But when I look back on it there were a lot of basic errors in terms of not putting structures in place in advance of taking on a lot of work. | Focus on what the manager deems as the key outcome, role requirements, perhaps omitting to consider or selectively considering the consequences.

Unforeseen implications due to inexperience and unknowns relating to organisational policy, and poor consideration of consequences. Highlights law of unintended consequences.

Retrospectively, the managers see how they missed basic elements resulting in organisational consequences. | **Unintentional Response** |

Because it's a live business and things like stock arriving aren't always routine it's about trying to reduce the impact to both end users and stores.	Trying to have foresight can work but needs an experience and understanding of how to incorporate for emergent situations.	

Findings and Discussion

Literature and research thus far have offered much to the discussion of managers and ethics from both an insightful and descriptive way. But research has yet to offer explanations of the activities of middle managers in a way which exemplifies how their ethics are mobilized in their respective organisations, and what the implications for this are. Additionally, it is important to understand if the way in which managers mobilize their ethics is consistent and what this may mean as research progresses. The theoretical possibilities of this research extend to ethics, middle manager literature, and practitioner journals. For ethics research, the contribution explains how middle managers are not specifically focused on making un/ethical decisions but merely attempting to make the best choice they can given their interpretations based on influencing mechanisms. Secondly, for middle management literature the findings offer a meaningful extension to what is already understood around the micro activity of managers but from an ethics dimension; and offers an alternative to other research approaches. Thirdly, and an increasingly important element is the role research can play for practitioners. We provide a follow up paper which explains the implications for practitioners, so only provide a brief explanation in this work.

Explanation of the Coding Process

In the following section we explain each theme of managerial response activity, how it emerges, and what this means in application. We identify four response types and begin with what we label 'proactive response', before moving on to 'defensive response', 'strategic response', and finally 'unintentional response'.

First order codes identify what managers are doing in terms of where their attention is focused, what their approaches to events are, and what their activity is. This culminates in offering insights as to their aims and how they rationalise their understandings and decisions. Differences in the four response types first order column relate to what middle managers say about what they do. The proactive respondent category is focused on delivering in their role via traditional means, good and honest hard work whilst recognising their hierarchical position in the organisations, here they are performing as agents. This groups attention and activity fails to demonstrate abstraction and higher-level understanding of events. As such they remain caught up in 'normal' managerial problem solving and action.

The second group 'defensive response' in contrast appear less focused on 'doing' activity, but more on coming to terms with the circumstances, relationships, and situations. A limited capability to make sense of the event and frame how to respond is perhaps drawn from

managerial fear which emerges through anxieties and inactivity. A focus on ensuring that there is no deterioration in the situation is assumed.

The strategic response category first order codes highlight managers communicating their activity using justification and opportunity exploration/exploitation terminology. Middle manager activity in these first codes centres on achievement of their purpose. This group recognises, communicates a sense of status and purpose in being a manager, it appears situations and non-routine events such as these offer a platform for them to demonstrate their strategic capabilities.

The final response type 'unintentional response' first order codes demonstrate middle manager focus and activity to be on the outcome or solution. Managerial problem solving literature suggests that moving to solution finding without recognition of the commonalities across symptoms and possessing full knowledge can lead to the issue being incorrectly approached addressed. This unsure point of departure with limited information and focus on the outcome influences the perceived irrationality of unintended consequences.

Explaining Coding on to Theme Development:

Managers responding in the proactive response category are potentially narrow in their focus. Their attention is not on themselves, but on achievement for stakeholders. This group has better considered the outcomes and has greater understanding of stakeholder requirements than unintentional category respondents, but lack those opportunistic insights. They remain influenced and focused narrowly on regular managerial activity. For creative outcomes to non-routine events this group is an unlikely source. In many cases the situations and circumstances get managed satisfactorily and ethically but with opportunities for firms and individuals being missed.

Defensive responses appear to suffer from more emotional and personal influences. The way in which they interpret and engage in activity appears driven by the way in which emotion and feeling about stakeholder relationships is dealt with, which suggests hesitation, a possible fear or apprehension. Trying to cope with their own apprehensions, worries, and interpretations means these middle managers are not completely focused on resolving the event or providing a solution. The focus of their response is pointed towards satisfactorily managing the perceptions of others as the situation progresses. So rather than take perceived risks they respond defensively. In this defensive activity a perception of lack of responsibility and duty can be created.

The strategic response theme emerges because of managers seeking to do the right thing and 'ethically exploit' in terms of their responses; whilst also recognising and exploiting the personal and organisational opportunity which they interpret as existing. Astute individuals recognise small windows for success and understand that opportunity exists outside of the mundane routine activity in organisations. They also identify that a response needs to be made, and this offers a chance to obtain attention, and done in the right way can provide reward.

Unintentional responses are emergent for both the managers and organisations. Created out of interpretation from an unsuitable departure point means risks can be high for all parties. But this is generally not the managers intentions. We find this group, although small is responding in a more instinctive way, they make swift understandings and determinations, but fail in the amount of consideration offered to their activity and its consequences.

Proactive Response

Managers in this first category are developing responses to events which involve both staff and customers, a sense of wanting to portray competence and ownership of the situation whether for personal or organisational reasons is exposed. Managerial activity is focused on responding promptly, professionally, assertively, and with purpose. A deliberate approach which is objective, rational, considerate to stakeholders is applied. Managers in this group also recognise that robust action needs to be taken, this sets the tone around how the event is managed going forward. Managers are engaged in information gathering and identification of the critical mass of individuals who are central to a successful solution being found. Managers also seek to present their identity to stakeholders as the competent and virtuous individual who is not afraid of resolving difficulties.

As data was analysed it became apparent that managers in this first response category assume to present a professional yet generic approach to others. As the conversation continues around managerial decision making and whether at times it can be ir/rational, deliberate or subconscious, it emerges these managers steer themselves away from presenting anything that infers they are having trouble, struggling to understand, or lacking in capability or competence. Demonstrating moderate strategic awareness they are not risk takers and seek to assume a controlled and deliberate approach when framing their responses.

Managers through their interpretations in this category could be perceived as wanting to please all parties, present a competent and professional image, whilst responding to the contradictory and paradoxical demands of each group. The issue of serving two or more masters (Pérezts, Bouilloud and de Gaulejac, 2011) as earlier mentioned possibly leaves these managers in a vacuum of being proactive but failing to address the core issues of the event. A particular response from interviews *'it's not about weighing up one or two options, you could have a multi-pronged see-saw that you're trying to balance'* highlights this point. From their perspective we see these managers as trying to balance and negotiate, coax, and coerce but in doing so it may be argued that the root or core mechanisms influencing the event fail to get addressed as managers are engaged in professional but basic managerial activity which can fail to address what is really going on (Johnson, Melin and Whittington, 2003).

This middle professional 'normal' ground that many managers assume has potential downsides. For the middle manager themselves, they may not obtain credit for achievements as they are neither pleasing either stakeholder to a point of commendable recognition or standing out in the eyes of the organisation. From an organisational perspective, middle managers who fail to maintain a focus on getting to the core of an issue but engage in traditional management activity may contribute to a repeat of these same issues due to interpreting that a safe, but not unique response is required when dealing with non-routine events.

Defensive Response

Although only 4 of the 23 cases used in this study reside in this category, some important messages emerge which have implications for all stakeholders both in the cases and from a research perspective. Firstly, the point form which managers in this category are cognitively departing when making their interpretations and framing their responses – are these characters naturally defensive in nature, or do other influences take precedent in their thinking? Secondly, is the issue due to either or both a lack of experience or capability in terms of what the manager can achieve. Or could it be that the manager perceptions of what the organisation expects as

ambiguous and unknown – and could we see linkages in this final point to the fourth theme discussed later.

Exploring the first point of the managers cognitive point of departure when framing responses in this category highlights that these four managers in these situations natural activate a cautious approach. Three of the four presented themselves as having limited authority, demonstrated personal insecurities in terms of their roles and the relationships with other organisational actors. They appeared subordinate, overly cautious, and expressed worry about what may occur. Strategy literature informs us that when designing that we must have full insights and experience of the broader environment to be able to plan to deliver on intended strategy but also exploit and respond to emerging opportunities that expose along the continuum. It appears that the starting points these managers assume when beginning to frame their responses is limiting their abilities to respond in the ways required. And, when retrospectively evaluated from senior management positions it is perhaps unsurprising these managers insecurities are further exposed and increased.

These managers carry their worries and concerns with them *'I've been told I'm a bit of a worrier and my manager can be a bit abrasive at times. As I have a wife and children at home I hate bringing that crap home with me, it doesn't belong there. So, you just don't know what you're going to get and you don't know the ferocity at which it will be given to you'*. From this position managers may well assume a response which they interpret won't inflame the situation or draw any unwanted attention. Subsequently, this group is contributing little to solve or successfully manage a non-routine event. In some cases, their actions may be viewed as unethical as they fail to address key challenges due to inaction or fear of repercussions.

Is this something that the organisation can assist with via supports, training, or guidelines and policy changes or does the issue manifest at a deeper individual level? The analysis exposes these managers can assume a personal responsibility and feel under personal attack from the elements and nuances of the event, context, or other involved actors. The responses from this category tend not to achieve much in relation to resolving the event issues and dilemmas, but possibly expose weakness to other stakeholders due to the limited activity that emerges from managers responses. A style of personal cognitive paralysis appears to hold these managers back from taking a level of control during these events which then manifests in unsuitable responses being activated, if at all.

We also expose a potential organisational weakness which may influence this response type, that of a lack of clarity around what is expected. If middle managers don't know what is expected form the organisation or it is ambiguous at best; when placed adjacent to personal cognitive characteristics and insecurities is it unsurprising that such defensive responses emerge. An organisations ethical infrastructure (Tenbrunsel, Smith-Crowe and Umphress, 2003; Fernández and Camacho, 2016) can offer clear and unambiguous guidance to managers and staff if embedded into organisational culture and sits at the core of the organisations values, mission, and vision. Ethical values and principles as built in and not bolted on along with greater senior management supports may assist managers in this category to shift their response framing to a more acceptable type.

Strategic Response

This group of managers recognise the opportunities that exist in the uncertainty of non-routine events. They identify circumstances, individuals, and contexts which they interpret as windows of personal opportunity, but their activity also serves the best interests of the organisation. Using ethics as a strategy is gaining attention as organisations and management recognise the

spill-over a responsible approach presents to stakeholders. These managers are essentially exploiting ethics. Non-routine events and the uncertainty that exists if viewed from a strategic perspective perhaps fall into strategic emergence and these managers can recognise this. Moreover, they understand if played correctly that they can exploit their responses and activities to gain personal recognition and present the organisation in a light of positive corporate social responsibility. A win win!

Perhaps a completely different point of departure exists in the mind of these managers to that of the previous defensive category. But why is this? Understanding that each of the managers in the 7 cases representing this category are competent, experienced and did not demonstrate insecurities or weakness. Rather in contrast, each manager responded with a confidence which possibly makes them more believable by other stakeholders involved in the situation. These managers arrive at each situation with a wealth of experience, all have worked in their respective roles for several years and are comfortable when understanding the broader contextual implications.

Along with experience, managers responding in a strategic manner are demonstrating explorative and exploitative tendencies (March, 1991; Lavie, Stettner and Tushman, 2010). As one respondent surmises *'get in there first and show the customer you are taking things seriously. It's you driving the agenda, it's about building up a case so that if there is an issue it doesn't lie with us'.* These managers appear to have a vision of what is required in the future, a foresight that positions them to exploit both for themselves and the organisation whilst expressing their values, *'I try to use a good moral base. It's just not sustainable, it's an issue that needs to be addressed and the organisations is just being naïve if they continue as they are. I don't mind being the odd one out, the one who'll call it!'.* This group is in many ways ahead of the curve in terms of how to take advantage of a situation whilst expressing their personal values.

Managers framing responses in this strategic manner understand that much of ethics is about how one's actions are perceived by other groups and individuals, and they exploit this *'we don't have room to fail, it's in our interest to maintain our reputation. I'm trying to repair the reputation with the customer. I'm doing 5am starts with certain customers to make sure their systems are okay'.* We can infer that this middle manager with their 5am starts is demonstrating a level of duty above and beyond the norms expected. They additionally recognise what their commitment signals to the customer, what it signals to their organisation, but concurrently it offers them in terms of how they are perceived. Furthermore, what this offers in terms of their organisational standing and potential future career, such managers understand how to play the long career game.

Unintentional Response

Like our second category (defensive response) this category contains a small number of cases, only 2 of the 23, but the implications for organisations of managers responding using this theme can present challenges which extend. The two cases presented include one experienced manager of 20 plus years and one with significantly less, only 5 years. A broader study of this category may elicit more substantial findings but from the two cases we are able to show significant implications because of managerial response framing. We argue that managers in this category are framing responses in ways which are possibly more instinctive in nature, they interpret and activate more innate responses which are less deliberately considered. This approach can lead to unforeseen consequences for the organisation and its stakeholders.

We propose that managers here are acting and framing responses by interpreting what they perceive as the right thing to do. This can lead to actions and outcomes for the organisation which are illegal but perhaps ethical, or legal but unethical from some perspectives. Similarity again to the second category is the cognitive point of departure for these managers. Not the same as the defensive category but one that is drawn from a strong belief in what they view as the core dimensions of their role – *'my job is to respond to families in crisis, so where was I going to leave him'*. This response was from the manager with 20 plus years of experience who interprets a sense of duty to her client but possibly 'selectively' disengages whether consciously or not from recognising the broader implications of their actions. This activity and response left the organisation exposed to legal challenge and the actions of the middle manager brought into question from both a professional and ethical perspective. In defence of the manager, this sense of duty was founded out of a frustration at a continued erosion of the resources available to them. This perhaps manifested as a way to expose failings in the system.

In the second case, we propose that the unintentional response was not because of the manager assuming a moral stance at some perceived wrong but merely one of inexperience. A unique situation emerged from this non-routine event which led to an initial interpretation that set off a chain of events, each exaggerating the situation to a more serious level with broader organisational implications. As the manager in this case attempts to make sense of the difficult dilemmas and potential paradoxes, it is potentially the case that certain consequentialist elements are omitted from their framing and interpretation of expectations. From an organisational perspective the management of this event led to a serious and public argument with a client and resulted in spill-over reputational damage.

The law of unintended consequences may retrospectively be considered here and should perhaps be introduced into the support's and guidelines organisations provide and offer to their managers. In non-routine events dilemmas are often at the centre of managerial thinking, and this can create an ethically charged situation for the manager. Such situations are not conducive to rational and deliberate decision making and critical information can be omitted from the response framing process.

Summary and Conclusion

Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe (2008) argued that for theory development to occur in the ethics field, alternative platforms which allow for enhancement in the empirical work in behavioural ethics would be needed (Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe, 2008). This work addresses the task and demonstrates that by understanding managerial activity in particular contexts new insights can be induced. The research also demonstrates that the ethics training managers receive needs to re-consider what is occurring in organisations instead of prescribing a normative approach to ethical decision making; as a one size fits all approach has limitations. Thirdly, the work contributes to the recent questions posed in research such as 'what should a manager do in a situation'. These questions highlight the issues managers face when resolving dilemmas in the workplace (Hiekkataipale and Lämsä, 2015).

We propose that most middle managers have a preferred or default response framing preference and it is via these that their ethics are mobilized. Responses will emerge through one of four themes, proactive response, defensive response, strategic response, or unintentional response. But inconsistency exists, and responses can shift dependent of the context, or situation that the

event exposes. A broad number of internal and external influences, the managers personal cognitive point of departure, and how the manager interprets the expectations placed upon them in terms of how to respond all contribute when framing responses. We conclude that these un/ethical responses are an aggregation of these influences and include both deliberate and automatic thought and activity. The responses exemplify variance exists in middle manager responses as they commonly iterate across the response themes depending on their interpretation of a given event.

From an organisational perspective inconsistency in managerial responses present organisational challenges. Organisations and their stakeholders like consistency, dependability, and predictability; and this may work well during programmed or routine activity. But when non-routine situations emerge, and managers are tasked with framing responses without specific rules or organisational ethical infrastructure to follow we argue things can and do go wrong. Organisations can suffer reputational damage, be exposed to legal challenges, be accused of unethical practices, and relationships with stakeholders can suffer or worse be terminally damaged. We propose that organisations can assist their middle managers by establishing and embedding core ethical organisational values into their everyday activity. This acts as a reinforcement for managers as to what the organisation stands for and who they are. Subsequently, it would be more difficult for managers to deviate from these values without exposing themselves to ridicule for maverick style behaviour.

By embedding organisational ethical infrastructure, policy, and guidelines into the roles and expectations of managers in such situations, organisations may reduce the likelihood of variance and inconsistency of managerial responses emerging. Perhaps, an argument is emerging that calls for less rules and more exposure for managers in their continuous professional development to understand these response themes, how they are framed, and other subtle elements which would facilitate a more considered and less varied approach to their response framing.

The topic of ethics in this work is subtle, but within this subtlety lies new ways of considering middle manager ethics. Not as a deliberate act or intention but emerging as an interpretation of expectation via their decision making and activity. We suggest that middle managers are commonly neither unethical or ethical but that the ethics emerges as part of the managerial activity. It is merely that during non-routine events that ethics are more likely to emerge than when mundane and programmed organisational activity is ongoing.

This research furthers the debate around how to incorporate individual ethical and strategic decision making into an organisational approach rather than everyone in the organisation framing responses based upon their own interpretations of organisational expectations. Most managers will want to respond in a strategic way if they are interested in both personal and organisational progress, so discussion needs to commence on how research and organisations can competently manage non-routine events in ways which offer win wins!

Some of the inconsistent response themes demonstrate some managers more than others possess an awareness of what the broader context is, how they are perceived, and what this means personally and for their respective organisations. Those who have awareness and can use this whereas others are limited in their vision. Does this mean that their responses are un/ethical? We conclude that managers are not being deliberately un/ethical but argue this can be an easy perception for others to assume. We suggest their perceived un/ethical responses are not intentional in many cases but emerge because of their interpretations. These

interpretations are the way middle managers they make sense of the situation and manifests in the way they envision potential solutions and the process to attain them.

Building on this we secondly propose that managers responses are framed and activated in terms of what they visualise as important in relation to event outcomes. If certain outcomes are incorporated and accepted early in the framing process, then the possibility of them being activated exist. But for managers with limited experience, who may have insecurities, difficulties in the relations with their seniors, or those who are more instinctive to respond there exists the chance for inadequate responses to emerge. Organisations can again loom for ways to develop supports to help these managers.

Finally, stakeholder expectations can drive managerial response framing, but this should only be part of how responses are framed. We can see that some responses such as the proactive theme offer acceptable outcomes but fail to resolve core issues which may re-emerge in the future. Whilst some limitations exist in this study, such as the small number of cases relating to defensive and unintentional responses; we suggest that research, in particular relating to the ethics of middle managers needs to incorporate more activity-based view, and attention based view approaches to uncover deeper insights and explain what is actually occurring rather than retrospective evaluation of cases.

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