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The middle managerial process of strategically aligning work-floor employees: An exploratory study

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SUMMARY

We know relatively little about how a formulated strategy is translated into results via employee strategic alignment. Middle managers are often noted as crucial actors in aligning employees to strategic goals. This paper examines the process that takes place at the middle managerial level vis-à-vis their work-floor employees, to ensure that their behaviours are in line with strategy. We used a mixed-method approach of 20 interviews with middle managers and six observations of their staff meetings. The resulting process model provides insight in the complexity of strategic alignment of how middle managers bring their work-floor employees from strategic awareness to showing seven categories of strategically aligned behaviours. Our primary contribution is that we demonstrate how the strategic alignment process works at the lowest level of the organisation. A better understanding of such micro-practices enables practitioners to effectively influence this process and strategically aligned behaviours through training and development.

Track: Strategy-as-practice (SAP)

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INTRODUCTION

Successful organisational strategy implementation is determined by the degree to which strategic alignment (SA) is realised consistently throughout the organisation, which is reflected in employees' behaviour (Colvin and Boswell, 2007). SA contributes positively to work outcomes and organisational performance (Biggs et al., 2014, Boswell, 2006), at the individual level it relates to employees' sense of belonging, role clarity and meaning of work (e.g. Boswell, 2006; Biggs et al., 2014), employee engagement (Christian et al., 2011, Biggs et al., 2014), and, through role clarity, to job satisfaction (Biggs et al., 2014). SA is a complex balancing act pressing on managers' shoulders where they should be careful not falling into the downward-spiralling "*alignment trap*" (Sull et al., 2015) by micromanaging their employees while overlooking the desired end goals.

The field of "strategy as practice" focuses on the organisational activities relating to strategy (Golsorkhi et al., 2010) and emphasizes the processual and social aspects of strategy development and strategy implementation, rather than purely the outcome (Asmuß, 2018). Strategy is thereby considered as multi-level process with complex human interactions (Whittington, 2003). Eventually, *individuals* and their behaviours shape the strategy and implement strategy, not organisations as a whole (Buller and McEvoy, 2012).

Despite the vital role of *work-floor* employees in realizing a company's strategic goals and results (Boudreau and Ramstad, 1997), our understanding of strategic aligned behaviour (SAB) amongst work-floor employees is limited. Existing literature mainly focuses on understanding SAB at top- and senior-management level (Gagnon and Michael, 2003, Boswell, 2006, Colvin and Boswell, 2007, Van Riel et al., 2009, Biggs et al., 2014), neglecting the work-floor level.

This study addresses this issue by 1) focusing on previously unexplored SABs of work-floor employees, and 2) providing a process model that increases our understanding of the SA-process taking place between middle manager and work-floor employees. We use a qualitative mixed methods approach to more effectively understand the SA-process.

SAB at middle managerial and employee level

Many studies show that middle managers can be key drivers of organisational strategy (e.g. Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000), whereby they implement deliberate strategy, facilitate adaptability synthesize information and champion alternatives (Mantere, 2008). Following Huy (2001, p. 73) we define middle managers as "*managers below the CEO and one level above the line workers and professionals*".

Previous research distinguishes several "hard" and "soft" factors that are controlled by top- and middle managers and can influence strategy implementation (Van Riel et al., 2009). "Hard" factors are the company's internal reward and control systems (Strahle et al, 1996) organisational structure, and administrative systems (Guohui and Eppler, 2008). "Soft" factors include, management support for strategy (Caldwell et al, 2004), training and development (Schneider et al, 2003; Lee & Miller, 1999), communication (Rapert et al., 2002) participative decision making (Ye et al, 2007) and managers' consensus and commitment regarding strategy (Guohui & Eppler, 2008). Both factors can influence to which degree employees understand and accept the strategy, as well as to which degree they actually show behaviours in-line with strategy implementation (Van Riel et al., 2009).

In order for employees to show SAB, line of sight (LOS) is a crucial concept. LOS entails “employee’s understanding of the organisation’s goals and what actions are necessary to contribute to those objectives” (Boswell, 2006, p. 500). Biggs et al. (2014) add that the extent to which employees acknowledge that strategic priorities are important should also be considered.

SABs are employee’s “on-the-job actions that are aligned with the strategy” (Gagnon & Michael, 2003, p.26). Previous literature identifies two types of employee behaviours that must be adopted: (1) In-role behaviours, (2) Organisational Citizenship Behaviours (OCB). Colvin and Boswell (2007) argue that the employee behaviours that are most essential for successful strategy implementation are the ones that cannot be specifically prescribed and are not part of routine behaviours, i.e. OCB.

The SA-process: The dynamics in the relationship between team leader and work-floor employee

Middle managers are relatively close to day-to-day operations of their team members (Dopson and Stewart, 1990, Hales, 2005). Furthermore, through their power and responsibility, they can direct employees to become more (or less) strategically aligned. As noted in the social learning theory by Bandura (1977), most human behaviours are learned by observation. Individuals will strive to imitate the behaviours of their leader, co-workers and other powerful role models to ensure that their behaviour is congruent with accepted norms (Bommer et al., 2003, Ehrhart and Naumann, 2004, Mayer et al., 2009).

However, this behavioural learning effect does depend on the quality of the relationship between team-leader and work-floor employee, known as leader-member-exchange (LMX)(e.g., Epitropaki and Martin, 2015). Research shows that the level of OCB is positively influenced by the degree of emotional support and exchange of valuable resources between middle manager and work-floor employees (Liden et al., 2008).

We thus adopt the entity perspective on relational leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2011), whereby this “relational” orientation on leadership starts with processes and not persons, and views persons, leadership and other relational realities as *made* in processes (Hosking, 2007), such as the process of SA. The *entity* perspective on relational leadership focuses hereby on individual entities (e.g., leaders and followers) and their perceptions, intentions, behaviours, personalities, expectations, and evaluations relative to their relationships with one another (e.g., Hollander, 1978, Lord et al., 1999, Uhl-Bien et al., 2000). This perspective looks thus at the interpersonal level (Endres and Weibler, 2017) whereby in this study, the focus of this interpersonal level is that of middle managers and work-floor employees.

METHODOLOGY

In total, 20 team-leaders (being middle managers) have been interviewed. We used conventional and snowball sampling to find them (McAlearney, 2006, Ritchie et al., 2013). Respondents worked in a variety of Dutch businesses and led a team with at least 10 non-management employees. A topic list was created based on existing SAB literature in order to create a similar structure during each interview and reducing risk of leading questions. Themes included in the interview were: strategic behaviours of work-floor employees, the role of both the respondent and work-floor employees in strategy implementation.

In order to triangulate the findings, additional data was collected via six team-meeting observations. Using the method of “participant observation”(Czarniawska, 2007).

A three-phased process of open, axial and selective coding (Boeije, 2014), was executed using Atlas.ti software. Following Gioia et al. (2013) the 250 SABs of the non-management

employees that were mentioned by the respondents were divided into categories compiled by the research team. To ensure reliability of these categories and reduce bias, a second coder repeated the process.

RESULTS

Several second-order themes were distilled that contribute to the SA-process (Table 1). We clustered these themes and identified on which organisational level they occur.

---INSERT TABLE 1---

Organisational level

Performance reviews may be instrumental to SAB, especially if employee's strategic contribution is explicitly included. Respondents noted that such a performance review must have tangible consequences, like bonuses or sanctions.

The *arrangement of work* can be done in such way that it is almost impossible for employees not to work according to strategy. Contrarily, enforcing SABs too much may lead towards the previously mentioned "alignment trap".

Team level

Informal power distance within the team and *perceived power distance* between team members and team leader may affect SAB. This may affect employees to not speak up against co-workers with more power, which counteracts SA.

Team-leader level

All team leaders *felt responsible for strategy execution*. Some respondents said that they share a responsibility with their team members, while others mentioned that it is up to the team leader alone.

Actual use of power of the team leader may affect SA. This is identified by respondents as the *formal power* they have in their role. For instance, threatening is identified as a mean to influence the SA-process.

Almost all team leaders mentioned *providing feedback to non-managerial employees*. The feedback focuses on correcting undesired behaviours; making compliments was deemed more difficult. Team leaders also try to stimulate desired behaviour by pointing to co-workers' exemplary behaviour or trying to *set the example themselves*.

Employee level

Employee's *extrinsic and intrinsic motivation* can influence SABs. Knowing the strategy and knowing one's own contribution to strategic team goals or organisational strategy gives meaning to one's work. Also, giving *meaning to work* on the basis of *common values or the place where you earn money* is mentioned.

Employee's SABs may also be linked to their *demographics*. Whereas some respondents linked professionalism to education, others mentioned age and work experience.

Finally, respondents noted employee's daily work's *connection to strategy*: The benefits of strategy must be clear to them. This happens when they experience the daily impact of strategy on customer satisfaction.

SABs middle managers try to establish

The interviews and observations also revealed specific SABs respondents try to establish amongst their work-floor employees and in their teams. Respondents found it difficult to define perceived SAB of their team members. Initially, most respondents provided general comments; they did not point out specific behaviours. As we continued to probe, nearly all team leaders were eventually able to mention actual SABs; respondents perceived a large variety of SAB on the work-floor.

Table II schematizes the categories, distilled from the 250 SABS mentioned. These categories were translated into an observation scheme that was consequently used to triangulate the data, performing pilot observations in six of the teams. During these observations we observed every SAB category.

---INSERT TABLE 2---

The first category concerned *in-role behaviours*: delivering on time, being focused on work, delivering high-quality work, sticking to deadlines, adhering to agreements, being present and prepared for meetings and being as productive as possible.

Extra-role behaviours relate to providing ideas for improvement, looking for solutions, taking on additional tasks and working longer hours, reporting unexpected situations, giving feedback to other organisational levels, and taking initiative and making decisions.

Having an individual learning and mastery orientation is also considered part of SABs. Hereby we identified an *individual mastery mind-set*, which entails: being open to new things, eager to learn and willing to step out of your comfort-zone. Another point concerned showing *individual mastery behaviours*: requesting help, keeping your knowledge up-to-date, and self-reflecting. Some respondents mention that looking beyond one's own task, department or organisation increases employees' likeliness to pay attention to strategy.

Respondents noted the importance of *behaviours in the team functioning process* that contribute to SA. This means solving problems together to grow as a team, taking a clear distinct role, discussing issues with team members, giving feedback to team members, offering to help or volunteer, and sharing new knowledge with the team.

DISCUSSION

After interpreting all comments and observations, we propose the process model shown in Figure 1. With this model we contribute to finding out "*what happens, rather than what is*" (Roe, 2008), within the strategy-as-practice field. Our model is based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and the entity perspective on relational leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2011).

---INSERT FIGURE 1---

The SA-process can be stimulated by the organisation incorporating strategy in work practices and performance reviews. The team leader's feeling of responsibility for the SA-process, which can be influenced by as well as influence the team's power distance, affects the strength of the team leader's use of power, feedback provision and exemplary behaviour. The team's power distance can influence or be influenced by employee's characteristics such as extrinsic/intrinsic motivation and demographics. In turn, employee characteristics influence the

employee's individual role behaviours and learning/mastery orientation. Both these employee characteristics and the team leader's use of power, feedback provision and exemplary behaviour, can be influenced by and influences the team functioning process. The proposed process model thus shows a whole range of multi-level interconnections that require future in-depth examinations to advance our knowledge of the strategic alignment process.

DIRECTIONS OF DEVELOPMENT

We still work on fine-tuning the process model and strengthening the theoretical contribution of the paper. We would welcome comments from BAM participants about a) relevant theories that we have not yet included in our theoretical framework, b) theoretical concepts that are helpful to understand the dynamics in the process model (Figure 1).

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Exemplary comments	1 st order components	2 nd order themes	Organisational Level
<i>Well, reviews of course contain some bits of strategy. What is our mission? What do we expect from you? And if you don't match, then you get a more negative, or different, review than if you matched the strategy more closely. So, in that sense it would be a review. (TL08)</i>	Strategy is included in the performance reviews	Performance reviews	Organisation
	Strategy is not included in the performance reviews		
<i>"I think it [the strategic goals] is alive because they cannot escape from them. Because we incorporated them in the job; we have a day start and a week start, and work with programs where people have to indicate how much time they spend on a task, so we can make the planning as tight as possible, to incorporate it in the job. It's almost impossible to avoid it" (TL03).</i>	Arrangement of strategically aligned work for the employee	Arrangement of work	
<i>Yes, disagreements among themselves are difficult, I think. They're not used to giving each other feedback. There is a strong hierarchy between older and younger mechanics. If you start here, you're a young mechanic by definition, even if you're 40. You have to earn your stripes, or something. So, a young mechanic will never give feedback to an older one, if he thinks 'I think what you're doing is not according to the rules', or 'is that safe, what you're doing'. (TL14)</i>	Informal power distance within the team	Power distance	Team
<i>I think that for many people hierarchy still plays a role. Many people are sensitive to hierarchy, that's how we have been raised, I'll say it's like that. I think younger generations are less sensitive to this, but our generation certainly is. So it plays a role, I won't deny that role. (TL05)</i>	Perceived power distance from team members to team leader		
<i>Yes, I think that's one of my main tasks, making sure that everyone understands their own role within the strategy. If you know what your role is, you will know how to behave and where to focus your attention. I always call it 'filter to focus'. (TL04)</i>	TL's responsibility to implement strategy	SA Manager's responsibility	
<i>In the end, everyone is responsible for what they do and how they do it. It must be clear from the start, of course, what is expected of you,</i>	Shared responsibility between TL and team from		Team leader

<p><i>maybe it's my job to make that clear. You agree on this, so that it's very clear to what you are committed and why you're doing it. And of course, it's a person's own responsibility to execute it. In percentages, it's 40 % me, and 60-70% the person him/herself who is responsible. (TL15)</i></p>	<p>the start</p> <p>SA Shared responsibility</p> <p>TL responsibility to implement strategy and needs help from employees to realise this</p>		
<p><i>"I think that for many people hierarchy still plays a role. Many people are sensitive to hierarchy, that's how we have been raised, I'll say it's like that. I think younger generations are less sensitive to this, but our generation certainly is. So it plays a role, I won't deny that role. (TL05)</i></p> <p><i>"Yes, I think someone said this in the last few months: I don't fully agree with you, but I'll do it just for you" (TL01).</i></p> <p><i>"I try to do it in a coaching way, to also show why they're doing it. That makes the work more fun. I mean, if you know why you're doing it, and you accept that reason, then it's more fun to do the work. But if they really don't want to, and keep resisting, then I take out many 'manager hat' and say: 'You have to'" (TL06).</i></p> <p><i>I see them if I visit the work floor, so I have to go see them myself, and then they can show desired behaviour. Especially in the workplace. I usually don't announce my visits, but it's in my diary. (...) Someone who was always late, whom last year I received complaints about, I told him, 'I'm watching you'. Then I'll visit the work floor at 07:55 and I don't tell him I will. (TL14)</i></p>	<p>Formal power of the TL</p> <p>Use of Power</p> <p>Threatening of employees by the team leader</p>		<p>Team leader</p>

<i>“So, if someone displays a best practice or a good example, I compliment him right then, so that others also realise ‘hey, that’s a good way to do things, maybe we can do it too’. (TL18)</i>	Giving positive feedback	Providing Feedback	Team leader
	Pointing out example behaviour in the team		
<i>“Yes, I like to change things, in the sense that punish and reward, that sounds very harsh. But giving a lot of compliments when they do well, and strong feedback to those who don’t, yes, I think that helps to achieve the behaviours that I want to see. (TL03)</i>	Giving positive and negative feedback		
	Showing example behaviour		
<i>That gives meaning. Maybe it’s nice to know that they are making a contribution. Of course, people want to know why they’re working so hard. (TL07)</i>	Values as meaning	Intrinsic motivation	Employee
<i>What you see, fortunately, is passion for the client. Then they’ll go the extra mile. You see it in their attitude (...) Commitment is very high. For 60-70 % of the employees it was a conscious choice to become a care worker. But a carpenter can also work for a building contractor, he would earn a lot more. (TL10)</i>	Self-identified connection to the strategy		
<i>There are a few who just come in for the money, otherwise they have nothing. You don’t get them with a strategy, you just have to tell them what they have to do every day (TL10).</i>	Money as meaning	Extrinsic Motivation	Employee
<i>Put quickly and simply, it does not concern them. They’re surrounded by it, but it’s still no concern of theirs. It’s not their job; is it work? Is it food? They don’t know what to do with it. (...) But as soon as you start talking about their behaviour and that kind of thing, that they can actually work with, and then say ‘but that’s also part of the strategy’, then they will think ‘why didn’t you say so?’ (TL08)</i>	Helped connection to the strategy		
<i>You notice it when people say that they follow the strategy, but in practice don’t have the ability to do so. They return to old behaviours. A plumber in a desk job, who after two phone calls can’t solve a problem, just goes into the boiler room to solve it himself. Because that’s much faster, because he has more skills than others. But he doesn’t realize that he has missed 4 or 5</i>	Education	Employee demographics	Employee
	Work experience		

<i>other emails or was unable to do other tasks. So, he's really falling between two stools, he understands which way we want to go, and realizes he cannot keep all his skills up to date about all the installations, but in an emergency, he returns to 'I'll do it myself'. (TL10)</i>	Age
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Table I. *Exemplary Comments, First-order Concepts, Second-order Themes and Organisational Level of Realising SAB * N=20*

Exemplary comments	Sub-category	Main category
<p><i>So, if you have a problem, you indicate it on time. You make sure you're always prepared for a team meeting. That kind of little thing. (TL03)</i></p> <p><i>It's about taking responsibility for what you're doing. Not just finishing your assigned tasks, but also feeling responsible for the result. (TL05)</i></p> <p><i>The main point is taking responsibility for your own work, and don't say 'I'm waiting for [name]'. No, just call him yourself. (TL03)</i></p>	Being focused at work	In-role employee behaviours
	Being present	
	Being prepared for meetings	
	Meeting deadlines	
	Delivering on time	
	Delivering high-quality work	
	Performing tasks accurately	
<p><i>If it's less fun, and no longer feels like their strategy, they will think 'it's 5 PM, I've done my job, I'm out of here'. It's all the small things; I think that if colleagues or team members are very involved with the strategy and feel they're part of it and that they are being listened to, they will be intrinsically motivated. And they will take on jobs out of their own volition, they help more, they will sign up for focus groups which are not part of their own tasks (TL01).</i></p> <p><i>Some public servants are always asking questions about everything, asking why, and being very critical. While another says: 'This is how it has to be done, so that's how we do it'. I think you have to give criticism about what the council secretary says and what the councilmen say. (TL19)</i></p> <p><i>I have an extreme example, which I think fits commitment. We were under enormous pressure (...). My only solution was to ask people to work all weekend in shifts. 24/7 shifts, all weekend long. So, you reach the point, how are we going to tell the employees. I have to tell you that you have to work all weekend, including night shifts. That doesn't feel right. (...) We came back to the office, and the people were already making a schedule on a flip chart, to work 24/7. That's knowing your business, having vision, being aligned with the surroundings, and really wanting to work for it with passion and commitment. (TL05)</i></p>	Being as productive as possible	Extra-role employee behaviours
	Taking initiative	
	Taking decisions	
	Looking for solutions	
	Working extra hours	
	Taking on additional tasks	
	Giving feedback to other levels of the organisation	
<p><i>"Make suggestions yourself, propose new ideas (...) You know, they really propose cool things themselves, things they've done in their spare time, they suggest those" (TL05).</i></p>	Reporting unexpected situations	
	Giving input for improvements	
	Being open to new things	

<p><i>I think there is a big difference between ability and capability. I think people who are capable, have more space to expand than people who are still learning, or people who are struggling just with their basic tasks. They have less room to look beyond what they think is their job. (TL03)</i></p>	<p>Being eager to learn</p> <p>Stepping outside the comfort zone</p>	<p>Individual employee mastery mind-set</p>
<p><i>Yes, and looking for connections. Don't just work at your desk. You can do a lot at your desk, but you have to go out and gather information. (TL17)</i></p> <p><i>Ideally, I would like to see them discuss things with each other, work together; if someone is busy, another runs in to help. Also ask for help. In one of my teams that was a problem; they don't want to ask for help, because everyone is busy. But you don't know that, you haven't asked. (TL06)</i></p> <p><i>Inform yourself about what happens, read about it, go to seminars, talk to your colleagues who are working on different things, show an interest in the world around you. Let me put it like this: show an interest in the world around you, as related to what you're working on.</i></p> <p><i>There are of course also people who are interested in the world around them, completely unrelated to what they're working on. So, show an interest in the world around you and translate this to your daily work. (TL05)</i></p> <p><i>Being capable to reflect on oneself, be critical of one's own actions, and see how you can improve. Without getting the feeling of being attacked, because that's an issue. I can show him something that he can improve, without him thinking 'oh no, she told me I'm doing it wrong'; but he starts thinking about it immediately: 'Okay, if I do it like that...' Then I think 'that's awesome'. But of course this is a tricky thing for many people, be critical of one's own actions, but I have really noticed how he does that. (TL14)</i></p>	<p>Looking beyond one's own department/organisation to gather information</p> <p>Requesting help</p> <p>Keeping your knowledge up to date</p> <p>Self-reflecting</p>	<p>Individual employee mastery behaviour</p>
<p><i>If you've been working with the guys from maintenance on a brochure, and later we have a meeting with other departments, you see that they do help other departments. You see that they help each other to reach a higher level. (TL11)</i></p> <p><i>Sometimes they do that [give feedback]. There are stories sometimes, when I hear, after the fact, 'I had a talk with [name], because it didn't go well. And I told him what the rest of the team thought about that'. Then I think, 'wow, that's awesome'. (TL04)</i></p>	<p>Solving problems together</p> <p>Giving feedback to colleagues</p> <p>Discussing issues with colleagues</p> <p>Sharing new information with team</p> <p>Taking clear/distinct role</p>	<p>Team functioning behaviours</p>

Making an offer to help/volunteer

*Table II. Exemplary Comments, Sub-categories and Main Categories of Strategic Aligned Behaviour *N=20*

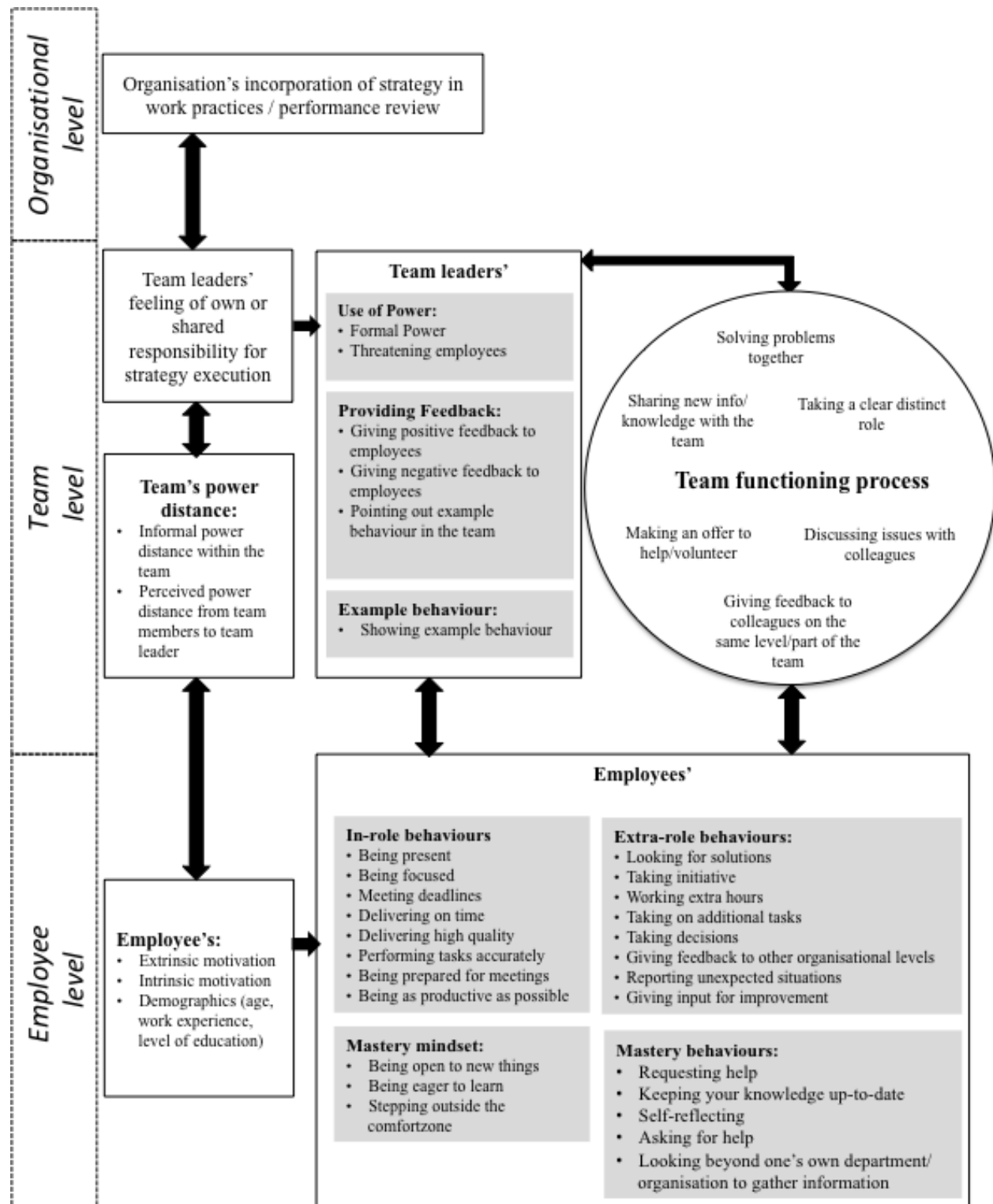


Figure 1. The Strategic Alignment Process on Work-floor level