

Study on Factors Influencing Middle-Level Managers' Involvement in Strategy Formulation in Zambia- A Case Study of Indo-Zambia Bank

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Abstract

Strategic formulation process is one subject which has extensively been discussed and researched in academic literature. Scholars of management have repeatedly been called to explore the strategy work of individuals beyond the senior management team as part of the open strategy concept. Within this, involvement is a way to prompt the input, contributions and feedback of various stakeholders across the organisation establishment. Further, there has also been a lack of understanding of the broader process of strategizing, particularly that it is collective process. The purpose of this research is to investigate factors which influence the level of middle managers' involvement in the strategy formulation of a single organisation (Indo Zambia Bank.). In doing so, it evaluates the impact on the organization of not taking on board key stakeholders, who are middle managers in the strategizing process. The study adopted an exploratory path and is qualitative nature. Data for analyses was collected through formal interviews with three (3) focus groups of the case organization. The focus groups are composed of experienced middle managers who have worked for the bank 10 years and above. Some of these are in charge of bank branches while the remaining are stationed at head office in various functional units. These stakeholders were selected based on their involvement in the strategy implementation process from within Indo Zambia Bank. A key informative interview was also conducted with the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Indo Zambia Bank. The CEO is directly involved in the day to day running of the Bank business and is also one of the core stakeholders in strategy formulation process. The literature review revealed that middle managers are perceived differently by different management theories. However, their critical roles in the strategy formulation process are evident and cannot be ignored. All authors agree that this intermediate management group is stationed between top level and lower-level management which is very broad definition. There is a considerable

overlap between elements of middle management roles, and the extent of the roles depends on the context of the organisation, time, and attitudes of middle managers. A review of the literature also found that middle managers play critical roles in administration, leadership, decision-making, and communication, although most researched literature consider middle managers as mere strategy implementers. This research enables Scholars to articulate the process of participation in the strategy making process, using the framework to explore the nature and levels of participation in other strategy environments.

Keywords: Strategy, Stakeholders Senior Management Strategy Implementation

Introduction

Financial markets globally and the banking sector in particular, are facing major internal and external challenges of fierce competition, rapid change, diversity of customer desires, renewable technology, social responsibility, and other factors (Bashir et al., 2020; Hossain et al., 2018). Additionally, in the wake of deregulation of business arena, expansion has taken place and banks are having wider choice in which they want to engage in activities in which they can provide financial assistance. In order to meet these challenges, the banks' administrations are required to adopt new approaches and strategies that will strengthen the competitive position by raising internal and external performance levels, especially strategic performance in all its perspectives, including financial, customers, internal business process, and learning and growth (Aziz, 2019).

The proliferation of banks in the Zambian economy as a result of rapid pace of economic development and government policies favouring economic liberalisation and the adoption of free market system has made the banking industry highly competitive. The 2019 survey which was conducted by PWC (2019) confirms that financial institutions find themselves increasingly exposed to the ever-changing challenges posed by non-traditional players who are using technology to create customer –oriented solutions.

Commercial banks like other organizations are aware that in a competitive business world, the development of a good strategy must be supported by proper alignment of its structure, systems, staff, skills, shared values, leadership behaviour, organizational culture and management processes. In order to be on the competitive edge, commercial banks should consider involving employees in strategy formulation process (Alshamsi et al., 2019). In the context of this research paper employees refer to middle managers.

Problem Statement

The case organisation is faced with challenges of not involving middle managers in the strategy formulation process. Strategy formulation process is centralized and all decisions are made at corporate level (Alshamsi, et al., 2020). The Top Management, the board, external consultants and selected top twenty customers are the main stakeholders involved in the strategy formulation process (Hossain et al., 2022). Middle managers and their respective teams at the case organization are only involved in the execution and implementation of strategy (Hossain et al., 2022). The researcher is a middle manager wearing a title of Senior Manager and is not part of the strategy formulation process although he is expected to actively be involved in its implementation. The Top Management of IZB however, communicate the strategic plan to middle managers through a strategic implementation review meeting following its finalization which is at this stage is ready for execution.

The Indo Zambia Bank Strategic implementation handbook (2022), acknowledges that the responsibility of delivering on all the strategic objectives of the business and Strategy Plan rests with middle-Level managers and their teams. It should be argued however, that although the strategic implementation message is well communicated by IZB top management, MLMs find it difficult to implement such a strategy since they are not part of its formulation.

Shala (2020); Hossain et al (2022) admits that the visionary leadership of companies should be oriented towards giving more importance to human resources during the process of strategy formulation and involve any team member who can contribute to the realization of organizational goals and organizational vision. According to Jaoua (2018), the articulation of strategy formulation and strategy implementation is possible by the involvement of middle managers in strategy. Strategy involvement or participation in this context is described as way to elicit the input, contributions and feedback of actors across the organisation, resulting in a better-quality strategy (Hossain et al., 2022). The cited authority confirms that strategy formulation is not a one man show but all stakeholders should be taken on board during its development and final implementation.

The existing literature, which the researcher deems incomplete, has paid little or no attention to discuss factors influencing middle manager's involvement in strategy formulation. This is considered as a gap. Additionally, there is no known study in Zambia which has addressed the issue related to "factors influencing middle managers' involvement in strategy formulation", and the researcher could not find any.

More specifically, there is a gap which considers factors that influence middle managers' involvement in strategic formulation. This study therefore has sought to investigate the gap that exists by undertaking research on "factors influencing middle managers' involvement in strategy formulation using the case study of Indo Zambia Bank." The Mc Kinsey theory will be applied to this research and employed to respond to the raised the research questions.

Limitations

This study only collated and gathered data relating to strategy formulation by middle managers at Indo Zambia Bank Limited. Equally, the research has only covered a single firm in the entire banking industry in Zambia. Therefore, the findings of study cannot easily be generalized to other firms in the banking industry as well as other sectors where the context may differ from that of the case organization.

Furthermore, the study focused and gathered data from the experienced middle-Level managers 10 years and above charged with the responsibility of running the Bank Branches and also the second in command at IZB corporate Offices, effectively excluding lower-level middle managers including all other members of staff who should also be involved in both strategy formulation and implementation process.

Additionally, a key informant interview was on conducted by the Chief Executive officer of IZB leaving out all other Senior management staff like the General Manager, Assistant General Manager and Chief Managers who too could have given valuable insights into the case topic. Therefore, the views of other staff who should be involved in strategy formulation and implementation have not been collected and taken into account in this study.

This implies that this study does not give a comprehensive overview of the opinions of all levels of staff affected by the strategy formulation at the case organization. The inability to collect data from a broad array of stakeholders who should actively be involved in strategy formulation and its ultimate implementation IZB was largely due to time and resource constraints.

Literature Review

Strategy is described as a plan, a guideline or the art of identifying company objectives, formulating plans as well as setting targets for business operations. According to Alina (2018), strategy is the entire set of decisions and actions made to create and implement plans and strategies in order to achieve the organization objectives. Involving middle managers in strategy formulation process is key to the success of strategy. The role of middle managers in organisations has however been a topic of discussion in researched literature.

Mintzberg (1978) advocates that the processes of strategy formulation and implementation are processes of social learning when all company's employees are adapting to the changing environment and middle managers are key actors in them. According to Kirill (2020), the perspective of middle management role in strategy shifted from solely being the implementors of top management intentions and their information source to also being the centre of strategy formation.

Middle management are said to drives intrapreneurship—companies' budget and investments are impacted by them. Middle Level Managers identify opportunities and present proposals tailored to maximize the chances of their acceptance by the board, since they are familiar with the evaluation criteria. Middle Managers are said to be an inherent tool for strategy creation as well as implementation (Annibal, 2021). The perspective of middle management role in strategy shifted from solely being the implementors of top management intentions and their information source to also being the centre of strategy formation. Vendramin et al (2021) advocates that by participating in decision-making processes at multiple organizational levels, middle managers can influence the interpretations and play a role in which interpretations are adopted across an organization.

Researched literature however has conflicting ideas about the role of middle managers in strategic formulation. For instance, according to Surju (2020), the contemporary approach to management holds that middle managers are influential strategists, whereas the traditional approach indicates that strategy is the domain of top management.

There is insistence in literature that the role of middle managers is that of interpreting, communicating crafted strategy to their teams, coaching and mentoring as well as motivating their teams to change strategy into action. For instance, Porter (1996) argues that the top management who he refers to as 'top table' must choose an appropriate strategy and be disciplined in sticking to this choice, perhaps with a time frame of a decade or more.

Porter also claims that the middle-level manager's main role is tactical, not strategic, and as such much of the resources at middle-management level should be spent on improving the operational effectiveness of the organization. Such perception of the middle level managers however is not in agreement with the idea that middle management is crucial for the success of an organization. Accordingly (DeCarlo, 2021), top level organizational strategies that are not cascaded down through the various levels of the organization are just that: top-level organization strategies. Buy-in and support for the top-level strategy will be weak unless middle managers are empowered to provide support, coaching and facilitation of strategy implementation.

The thinking that middle level managers play an important role in both the formulation and implementation of strategic change is gradually increasing (DeCarlo,2021). Wamugo et al (2022), in his research paper also confirms that the degree to which middle level managers are included in decisions on strategy formulation frequently affects their implementation efforts. Management theories advocate that Championing alternatives by the middle level managers to the top management promotes and encourages creativity which goes a long way to feed into the modification and creation of future strategies as the vantage position of the middle level manager allows him the unique opportunity to analyze strategies and suggest improvements. Despite all the conflicting views by management theories middle managers are a heartbeat of organizations as they play a critical in the formulation and implementation of strategy.

Research Questions

This study is premised on the main research topic: “factors influencing middle managers’ level of involvement in strategy formulation. The research paper will address the following research questions;

- (i) How does organizational culture influence middle managers’ involvement in strategy formulation?
- (ii) What effect does organizational structure have on middle managers' involvement in strategy formulation?
- (iii) What impact does management style affect middle managers’ involvement in strategy formulation at Indo Zambia Bank?

Research Objectives

The main objective of the study focused on identifying factors influencing middle Managers' involvement in strategy formulation at IZB.

Following are Sub-Objectives;

- (i) To study the effect of organizational culture on middle managers on strategy formulation at Indo Zambia Bank
- (ii) To explore the effect organizational structure on middle managers on strategy formulation at Indo-Zambia Bank
- (iii) To investigate how management style affect middle managers’ involvement in strategy formulation at Indo Zambia Bank.

Research Methodology

This section outlines the methodological approach, research philosophies, research designs, unit of analysis sampling methods, data collection methods, types of data used and also detailed analysis techniques which will be deployed in the research study.

The study adopted the social constructivism philosophy for the fact that the theory uses qualitative research which research technique has been adopted by this study. Qualitative methods are designed to study human phenomena (mental facts) as meaningful products of human consciousness. Qualitative research also aims at casually explaining what happens in the world independent of human mind. Further, the research adopted this philosophy because many other previous have used it.

The deductive and inductive are the two known popular research approaches. Phair (2021), espouses that a deductive approach is used in quantitative research. Although deductive approaches are commonly associated with quantitative research, there are no set rules and some qualitative studies may have a deductive orientation more especially where there are established theories like Mc Kinsey 7s which this study will apply. This being the case, research will therefore ride on deductive approach since it is premised on a well-established theory. A cross-sectional method as the time horizon of the research was applied in this study. This method advocates one time collating of data from the targeted population. Further, time constraints on the part of the researcher made him settle for the cross-section method. Purposive sampling is common in qualitative research and mixed methods research and is particularly useful if the researcher needs to find information-rich cases or make the most out of limited resources (Palinkas et al., 2016). The basic benefit of this sampling technique is that rich information is possible to collect on even a low budget. The other two advantages are that it is easier to get in-depth information since the researcher identifies the right audience and selects them and if used properly this sampling method can substitute systematic sampling more the reason why this method was favored for this study.

The study employed a single case to answer the research questions. According to Yin (2018), who pioneered the case study as a research method in its own right, defines a case study as a method that “investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-world context and relies on multiple sources of evidence. In this type of research, the subject is analyzed to gain an in-depth understanding of issues in a real-life setting. This research paper has therefore settled and opted to employ a case research design to answer the research questions since similar past researched papers in this area have used case studies. Further, by virtue of being an employee of the bank, the researcher has a better understanding of the institution which he has adopted as a case study. Primary data was collected from Memos, Financial Reports, Indo Zambia Bank websites, Bank of Zambia website and Key informant interviews with CEO of the Bank. The other source of data was the constituted focus groups composed of 8-to 12 middle managers.

Data Analysis Plan

The research was inclined to collect data from the targeted small population of middle managers as well as the Chief Executive Officer of the case organization. Three (3) focus groups made up of 8 to 12 members were composed. These were made up of experienced middle managers and classified as FG1, FG2 and FG3 respectively. Interview with focus groups lasted between one and one and half hours. The Chief Executive Officer was also a trusted source from whom the data was collected through key informant interviews conducted with him directly by the researcher. The fact that CEO is a very experienced and also directly involved in the strategy development and day to day operations of the Bank made him to be a reliable source of information on strategy development. Interviews with the three (3) focus groups and Key informant interview with the CEO of the organizations helped the researcher ascertain whether what the interviewees were saying is what goes on during strategy formulation in IZB.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis method was adopted and applied in the analysis of collated qualitative data. The thematic analysis method was preferred because it is an increasingly popular

method used in the analysis of qualitative data that captures patterns across the raw data and structures the data into meaningful themes (Braun et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2021). Since QDA Miner and other common analytic software were not readily available, Microsoft Word was used for the data analysis.

The data analysis process was cycle of five phases. The first phase involved the creation and development of a Microsoft data table. All the data transcripts and audio recordings of the stakeholder interviews was transferred into the created table. In the second phase, the researcher reviewed the data removing the information which he felt was noted needed and could not address the study question. This led to a more reduced and refined data table. The third stage involved creating open codes from the revised table, compiling information related to each theme, and carefully choosing which categories of significance to join together. In the next and fourth stage, the researcher modified and developed themes. Dawadi (2020) espouses that it may be necessary to collapse themes together, split them further or discard ones that are not central. The researcher carefully checked and ensured that the developed themes were able to tell a convincing story and at the same time answer the research questions. In final phase, the themes were developed into the wider report. This involved weaving the analytic narrative into a persuasive study drawing evidence from collated data.

Finding and Conclusion

According to the researcher's findings, the interviews conducted with the three (3) focus groups revealed that MLMs had a good understanding of strategy. For instance, the respondents in focus Group 1 (FG1), FG2 and FG3 described strategy as a plan which is set to achieve organizational goals and objectives. However, respondents in FGI submitted that there was urgent need for top management to bridge the disconnect between top management and the rest of the organization. FG2 & FG3 added that the case organization is currently going through quiet quitting, where majority of staff seem to only put in the bare minimum in terms of effort in performing duties, leaving the burden almost entirely up to top management and a few staff to achieve targets.

Further, FG1 espoused that failure to involve middle managers in strategy formulation negatively impacted its implementation. This is so because buy in into the strategy is not good as lack of involvement MLMs usually leads to lack of interest in the process of execution. FG2 acknowledged that Middle-Level-Manager are directly and heavily involved in the day-to-day operations of the Bank, such as running branches and have key roles in the running of the Head Office departments as second in command.

Additionally, FG3 accentuated that most staff in Middle Management have a strong attachment to the Bank hence failure to include them in the process would hinder some valuable contributions to the Bank Strategy. FG2 also confirmed that Middle managers have a deep understanding of the operational realities within the organization therefore if their valuable inputs are not considered by top management, the formulated strategy might not align well with the practical capabilities and limitations of the organization. This misalignment can result in unrealistic goals and inefficient resource allocation. All the focus groups attested to the fact that the case organization's centralized structure was an impediment in their involvement in the strategy formulation process.

Most stakeholders in all the three focus Groups pointed to existing management style which is not more engaging- and does not take onboard MLMs in decision making as another major obstacle in strategic development. Although the CEO in the key informant interview with the researcher insisted that MLMs were involved in the strategy development process and that the case organization was trying to apply the top down, bottom-up approach, information gathered from the three focus groups was however at variance with the CEO's submissions.

These findings confirm that all the MLMs who are the key stakeholders to the strategy formulation process, are aware of the importance of strategy although they are of the view that they are left out by the case organization during this exercise hence find it difficult to implement the strategy even if it is properly communicated due to lack ownership of it.

In conclusion, this study investigated factors influencing Middle-Level-Managers' involvement in strategy formulation and was based on Mc Kinsey's 7s theory. An exploratory path was applied to the study and was qualitative in nature. Two types of data collection methods were used one being three constituted focus groups composed of Middle Managers (each group made up of 8-12 stakeholders) and the other through informative interview with the CEO of the case organization. Thematic method was used in the analysis of data. The research was conducted in Zambia using a single case study of Indo-Zambia Bank which is one of the renowned banks in Zambia. Case study research adopts a more holistic view, considering everything rather than a limited number of variables or factors that are often the focus of other types of research, resulting in oversimplification (Tight, 2017).

The study concluded that Middle-Level- Managers despite being perceived as communicators and implementors of strategy should be taken onboard in the strategy formulation process. Middle-Level Managers need to feel a part of the strategy formulation process and should be seen as equal partners in its implementations and not mere work horses. Further, if middle-Level-Managers are left out of the strategic formulation process, they may not feel as though they own the formulated strategic plan by top management, thus would not care about its success or failure.

The study gave the researcher an insight into the critical role middle Managers play in mentoring, coaching, training their teams as well as, communicating the formulated strategy and its ultimate implementation. These are valuable insights the research did not have in this area of study. Middle Managers are also considered to be a true and reliable source of information which forms part of the strategy. This study will help build the knowledge base currently unavailable in the area of strategic formulation and management.

Recommendation

This study mainly focused on the factors influencing middle managers' involvement in strategy formulation using the Mc Kinsey's 7s theory which was developed by (Waterman et al., 1980). Equally only a single case organization was used whose management styles and environment may be totally different from other organizations in the same industry.

Although an attempt has been made to evaluate how the factors such as staff, style, culture and systems influence the role of middle managers in strategy formulation, future research could focus on conducting in-depth analysis of specific attributes of middle managers and

how these impact their effective involvement in strategy formulation. Factors such as age, gender, educational attainment, job experience and job satisfaction could be analyzed to assess their effect on strategy development by middle managers. Future research can also consider looking at the internal and external environmental factors under which strategy is formulated and how these affect the middle managers' involvement.

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