Middle Managers in English Further Education Colleges: Understanding and Modelling the Role

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What is This?

Middle Managers in English Further Education Colleges

Understanding and Modelling the Role

Ann R.J. Briggs

ABSTRACT

This research examines the work of middle managers in English further education colleges holding a range of responsibilities. Case study research at four colleges drew on data from senior managers, middle managers and their teams, college documents and observation of meetings. The enquiry focused upon the aspects of role performed by the managers, the environment for management within which they carry out their role, and features of the college environment which enable and impede them in their work. Five aspects of role were identified and discussed, those of corporate agent, implementer, staff manager, liaison and leader. Factors within the college environment which impact positively and negatively upon the role were modelled in order to locate the key influences upon the effectiveness of the manager role, and thereby the effectiveness of the college.

KEYWORDS *curriculum manager, post-compulsory education, service manager, student service manager, typology*

Introduction

This study investigates the work of middle managers working in English further education (FE) colleges. It offers a typology of their role, and presents a series of models of effectiveness, both for the middle manager role and for the whole college. Modelling is used as a key feature of the analysis, to represent and discuss the underlying patterns of interaction which affect the manager role, to clarify the factors at work within the management environment and to offer strategies for addressing problems concerning the role. Using the insight gained, the models have potential use for problem-solving and for considering the effects of college design.

There is little empirically based understanding of the roles of middle managers in English further education colleges, yet these managers occupy a pivotal role within a complex setting, translating the purpose and vision of the

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college into practical activity and outcomes. Studies of middle managers in educational settings generally focus upon the role of the curriculum manager, for example subject leaders in schools and heads of department in universities. The research presented here takes the stance that, for a college to function effectively, all middle manager roles are essential; the study therefore examines the work of middle managers across the range of responsibilities to be found in colleges: for curriculum, for services to students and for college services.

The experience of colleges in the ten years since incorporation has presented multiple factors for change in the work of middle managers. Incorporation transferred to colleges functions previously performed by the local educational authorities (LEAs); it introduced a funding system which coupled new systems of unit funding with increased levels of accountability and data management. In response, colleges developed new systems to manage data, finance and tracking of students, and to monitor quality, necessitating additional manager roles, particularly within college services. In 1997, a revised framework for college inspection was introduced, including mandatory self-assessment, and the new millennium brought the transfer of accountability from the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) and its inspectorate to the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). These changes intensified the focus upon systems of accountability for all college managers. Where response to change has not been effective, colleges have suffered financial and evaluative penalties. In short, colleges have needed both efficient and effective systems in order to survive and prosper, and the onus of implementing these systems falls upon the college middle managers. Understanding their role, and the aspects of the college environment which facilitate and impede it, is therefore important in enhancing the successful operation of colleges.

Middle Managers in Schools and Colleges: A Review of Typologies

In order to understand and communicate the nature of the role, a new typology was sought, as no empirically based typology existed. The literature offers a range of typologies of middle managers in schools and analyses of the role in colleges, each one shaped by the viewpoint of the observer and the perceptions of the respondents. The mediation and liaison activities of middle managers feature strongly in analyses of both sectors. Gleeson and Shain (1999: 461–2) see academic middle managers in colleges as 'mediators of change' between senior managers and team members, translating policy into practice by 'constructing the art of the possible . . . in ways which are acceptable and make sense to both groups' (Gleeson and Shain, 1999: 470). Glover et al. (1998: 286) likewise see school middle managers as 'translators and mediators, rather than as originators of policy and culture'. Busher and Harris's (1999) four dimensions of the middle manager role follow a similar theme: translation, which involves bridging and

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brokering; fostering collegiality by enabling shared vision; improving staff and student performance; and a liaison or representative role. Studies of college middle management, both in the UK (Gleeson and Shain, 1999) and in the USA (Gillett-Karam, 1999), bring the liaison aspect of role to the fore through identifying translation and brokering activities.

Alexiadou (2001) emphasizes the pragmatism with which the 'responsive' college manager mediates change, acting effectively within constraints and generating structures which accommodate new realities. Gillett-Karam (1999: 5–6), reporting on US community colleges observes, similarly, that midlevel managers are 'the buffer between faculty and administration'—that is, between teaching staff and senior management—and that they act as conduits, as mediators, communicators and facilitators. She comments that 'leading from the middle is no easy task'.

The school head of department role is seen in terms of social agency by Brown and Rutherford (1998). They see the role in terms of servant leader, organizational architect, moral educator, social architect and leading professional. This typology emphasizes the values which underpin the head of department role: empowerment, ownership and partnership, belief in education and the value of learning. Turner and Bolam (1998) analyse the professional knowledge of heads of department, proposing a sixfold typology: knowledge of people, situational knowledge, knowledge of educational practice, conceptual knowledge, process knowledge and control knowledge.

The various activities undertaken by the college middle manager are the basis of the Further Education National Training Organization (FENTO, 2001) 'standards' for management. The four key activities are seen as: developing strategic practice; developing and sustaining learning and the learning environment; leading teams and the individual; and managing resources. Peeke (1997) focuses upon a wider range of activities in describing the curriculum manager role in colleges: servicing college bureaucracy, leading curriculum development, quality assurance, external liaison, managing people, managing resources and development through academic leadership. This analysis looks outwards from the college, noting the external liaison role of the manager, and introduces the concept of leadership. Both liaison and leadership are emphasized in research by Drodge (2002) into the management of vocational education in the British, Dutch and French systems. Drodge found that, in all three systems, managers are perceived as being educators, as managing boundaries and as providing personal leadership, which he sees as being closely tied to the notion of professionalism.

Constructing Typologies

As this brief review indicates, the approaches taken to analysing the middle manager role vary according to the stance of the observer. Some typologies are holistic; some imply that managers may perform some functions and not others. Different organizational structures and leadership cultures are seen as

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encouraging or suppressing different aspects of the middle manager role, and managers often have preferences as to which parts of the role they undertake, and which they minimize.

From analyses of the role in further and higher education (Drodge, 2002; Gleeson and Shain, 1999; Lumby, 1999, 2001; Peeke, 1997; Powell, 2001; Smith, 2002), a pattern of manager activity emerges. Managers of different types of college function may have differential authority in role (Lumby, 2001). However, middle managers are involved to a varying degree in whole-college activities such as devising strategy (Lumby, 1999), which give them a sense of corporate agency, and the extent of their knowledge of corporate management may affect the operation of other aspects of their role (Powell, 2001). They implement institutional strategy and policy at a local level, through managing people and resources to develop, provide and support learning activities (inter alia Peeke, 1997; Smith, 2002). They may have 'creative space' in which to develop provision geared to local priorities (Drodge, 2002), which may offer them a dispersed leadership role. Their liaison activities are evident, and this includes a 'translation' or 'buffering' function (Gleeson and Shain, 1999), usually operating between the senior managers and their teams. The five main functions outlined here—corporate agency, implementation, staff management, liaison and leadership—are explored through the research data, and form the basis for the typology presented.

Research Context and Methodology

The findings reported in this article are part of a larger study of the role of middle managers in English further education colleges (Briggs, 2003a, b). Multiple case studies were carried out at four colleges where management was deemed to be effective through national inspection. They offer potentially differing contexts for management, in terms of college size, numbers of sites and whether they are recent or not-so-recent amalgamations of colleges, or had never been amalgamated. For convenience, they were selected from colleges in the East and West Midlands, and from London, and are referred to as Colleges A, B, C and D.

An interpretive approach was chosen, acknowledging that the phenomena under investigation reflect 'the complex world of lived experience' (Schwandt, 1998: 221). The identification of patterns of knowledge within the data allows the systematic construction of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), with a particular focus on the 'discerning of patterns' (Tesch, 1990), as a basis for conceptualization. Case studies are ideal for this purpose, as they enable particular attention to be paid to: 'the subtleties and complexity of the case in its own right' (Adelman et al., 1980: 59–60). In this study, generalization and theory-building are strengthened through replicating case studies, enabling data to be seen through the 'multiple lenses' (Eisenhardt, 2002: 7) of different college environments. The theory constructed does not aim at scientific or rational generalization, but it does seek insight which may be applicable elsewhere (Bassey, 1999).

Five strands of enquiry were applied at each college:

- Interviews with four senior managers, including the principal, to elicit their perceptions of the middle manager role and the factors in the college environment which enable or impede it.
- Focus group interviews with three sets of middle managers: heads of curriculum areas, heads of college services and heads of college student services about the nature and performance of their role. Group interviews were chosen in order to gauge a consensus of feeling on the research issues.
- Questionnaire survey of a sample of team members of the managers interviewed in the focus groups. This enabled a 360-degree exploration of issues impacting upon the roles in question.
- Observation of a meeting at which a range of senior and middle managers were present. This admittedly small data set provided a 'snapshot' of management in practice, and helped to gauge predominant styles.
- Documentary analysis of college documents illustrating the management structures. This provided further evidence of how the college perceives and operates its management systems.

A total of 16 senior managers, 45 middle managers and 288 team members were surveyed. Data for this article have been drawn from all of these sources through analysis of the concepts presented (see Briggs, 2003a), and have been synthesized and conceptually modelled. Models present an abstract or simplified description of a real-world situation (Gass and Harris, 1996). Increasingly used in the fields of organizational learning in order to support both understanding and action (David, 2001), they help to simplify complex situations and to guide decision-making (Rivett, 1994). Importantly for this research, models are a potential means of understanding the intricacy of organizational environments and their management systems, thereby enabling managers to develop a more holistic and dynamic perspective of the way their organization works, and supporting cross-functional activity within institutions (Fowler, 2003).

Middle Managers: Modelling Aspects of Role

The data from the four case study colleges were subject to an iterative process of conceptual analysis (see Briggs, 2003a). A typology for the generic middle manager role was constructed, guided by the literature but drawn from the interview, questionnaire, observation and documentary data. This depicted five aspects of role: corporate agent, implementer, staff manager, liaison and leader. These aspects, together with their principal defining features, are presented in Table 1.

Within each of the aspects of role, analysis of the data revealed the tension for managers between the mechanical need to support whole-college

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Table 1 Aspects of role

Aspect of role	Defining activities
Corporate agent	Understanding and taking part in the 'big picture'
	Contributing to strategy, and implementing it with an understanding of whole-college issues
	Working within, and sometimes setting up, the management systems of the college
Implementer	'Making it happen': carrying out curriculum and departmental activities
	Developing the service department or curriculum area
	Managing resources; managing students and managing for students
	Managing the interface between the college systems and the activities of the department
Staff manager	Developing and enabling staff
	Organizing, monitoring and evaluating the work of staff
	Understanding the individual strengths and needs of staff
Liaison	Being a 'bridge' between senior management and the departmental team
	Liaison across the college at middle manager level for whole-college and cross-college operation
	External liaison to promote and enable the work of the department
Leader	Acting as role models
	Being instigators of action
	Creating and encouraging; being an entrepreneur
	Having responsibility for substantial areas of provision

homogeneity, and the organic need to develop departmental specialisms and to respond to the differentiated needs of students, clients and staff (Burns and Stalker, 1961).

The analysis of the qualitative data also identified key features of the college environment which impact upon the role, and ways in which these features could either facilitate and impede managers in their role (see Briggs, 2003a). From the outcomes of these analyses, models were constructed to gain further insight into the interaction between the college environment and the different aspects of role. The modelling is presented in Figures 1–5: one model for each aspect of role.

The features of the college environment which the data indicate as relevant to each aspect of role form the spine of each model. These are linked to the facilitators and impediments for that aspect of role, depicted on the right- and left-hand sides. For reasons of clarity, only the most important relationships are shown, based upon the analysed evidence.

Corporate Agent

The data indicate that corporate agency depends upon the managers' understanding of their role in carrying out the whole work of the college. This

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understanding is gained through involvement in cross-college strategic, operational and developmental activity: where this type of activity is limited, corporate agency is less evident. Managers who are corporate agents show awareness of college values, of the internal and external working environment of the college and of its strategic activities in response to factors within its environment. They demonstrate an understanding of the framework of accountability of the college, and of their obligations within it.

Key features supporting corporate agency, identified through modelling of the analysed data, are the clarity and 'usability' of college structures and systems. Factors which enable understanding—of strategy, of accountability, of college values—are also important, as are mechanisms whereby the manager is able to interpret corporate agency and apply it in the differentiated context of the department. The model may thus be 'read' to elicit insights from the data. Reading the right-hand side of Figure 1, to consider impediments to corporate agency, the following argument can be constructed.

> If college sites are difficult to navigate, and the structures prevent understanding of the whole-college context, managers have little understanding of whole-college strategy. This lack of understanding, combined with poor communication, may lead to managers' reluctance to comply with mechanical systems, and a lack of acceptance of their corporate accountability.

The models can also be used for problem-solving and to identify opportunities for intervention. For example, if the sites are physically difficult to navigate, as in College C, compensating facilitators can be sought within the models. At this college, management structures are already being used to facilitate cross-college networking, thereby developing the managers' understanding of internal college contexts. This does not physically enable access, but it may help the managers to make better use of the access which they have. At College D, middle managers seem to lack understanding of whole-college strategy. Ideally, this needs to be addressed by including them more strongly in the strategic planning process. Ways of strengthening managers' understanding of whole-college values and purpose could also be developed, so that they will better understand and apply 'given' strategy.
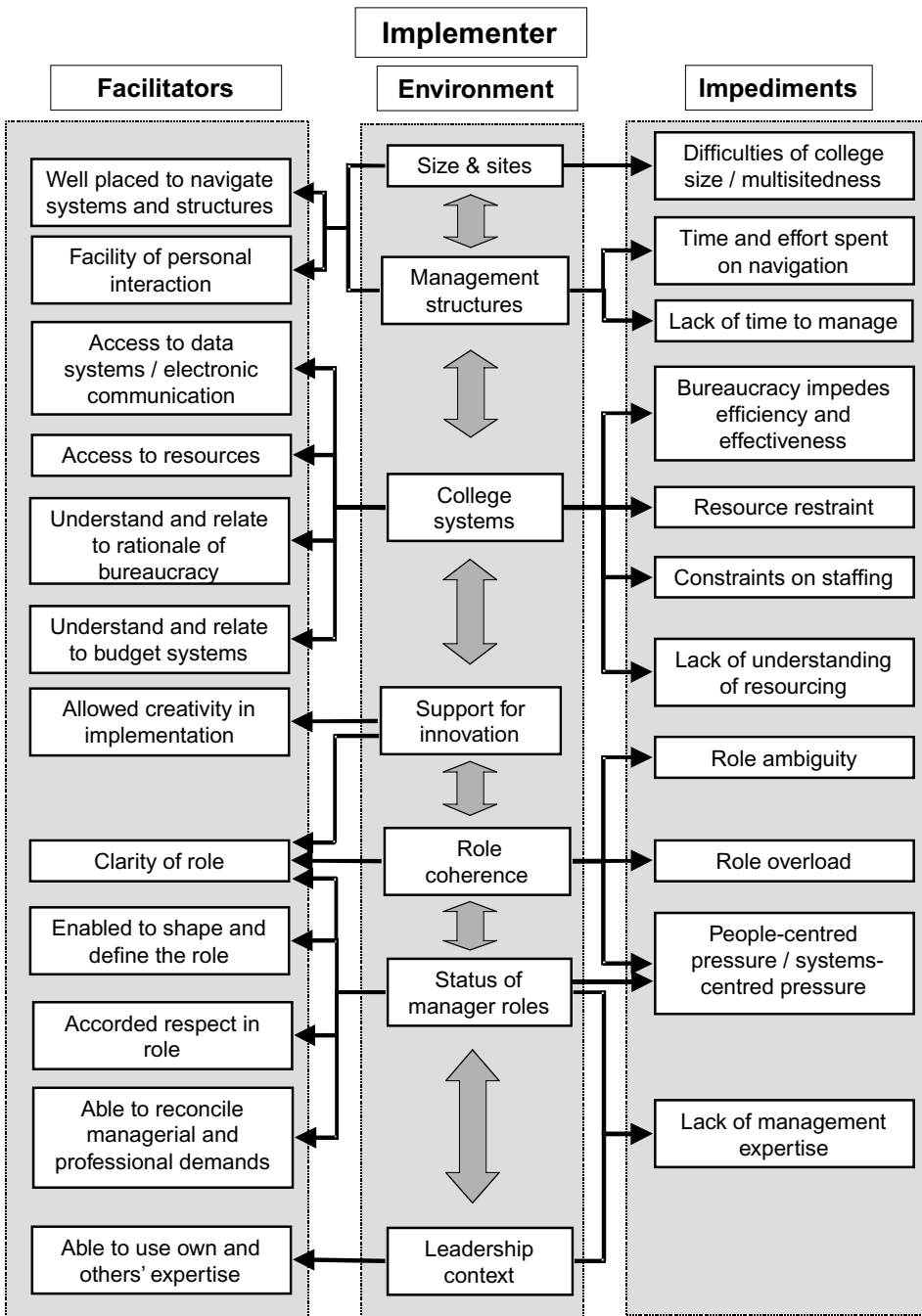
Implementer

Implementation is the most visible feature of middle manager role in the case study colleges. It entails carrying out college policy, through the purposeful and effective organization of departmental activities. If implementation does not happen, the resulting lack of action is noticeable. This leads to a feeling of pressure upon many managers: a feeling that there is simply too much to do, and thus of inadequacy. The largely mechanical nature of these activities is also a disincentive to effective implementation: some managers express enthusiasm for setting up and operating systems, but for many it is either a chore or

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Figure 1 Modelling the corporate agent aspect of role
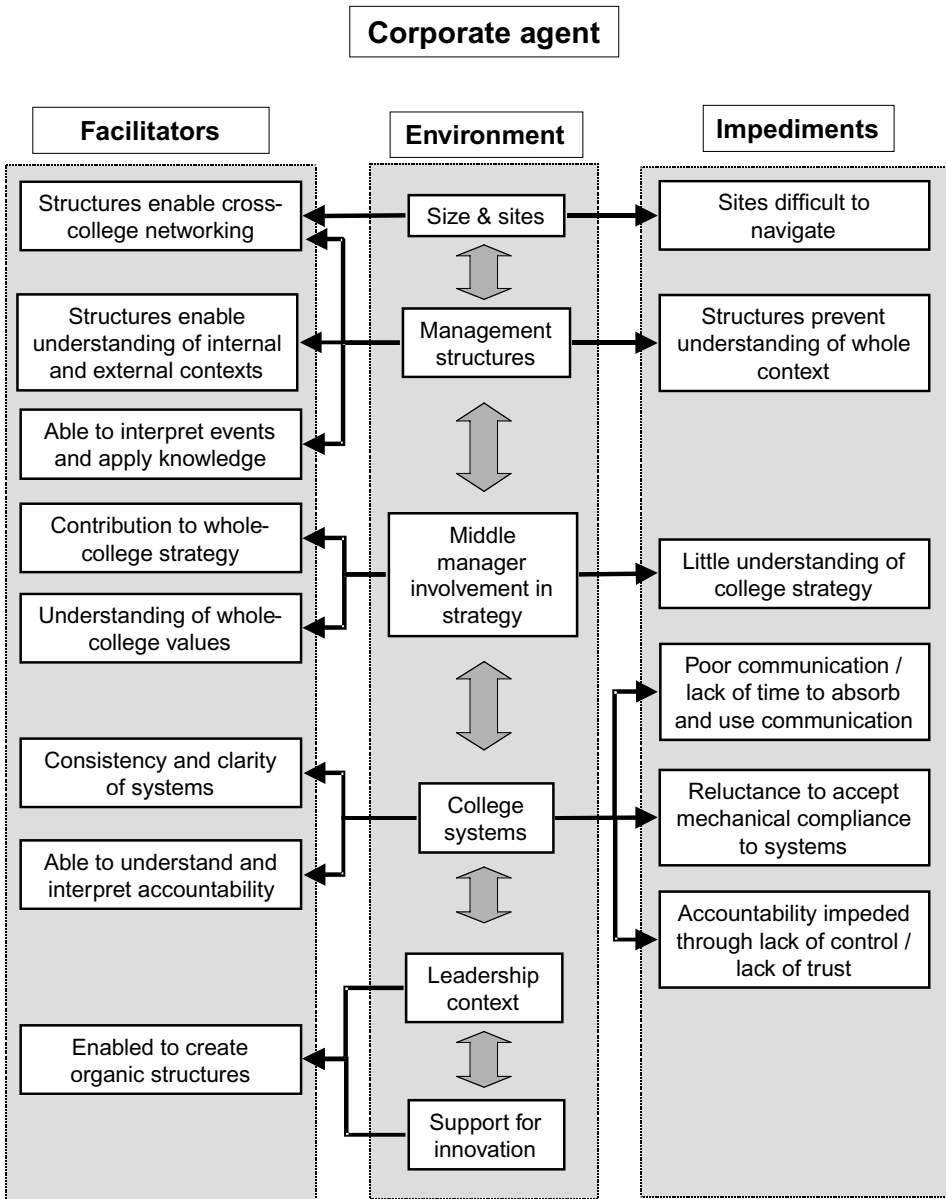
logistically difficult. Implementation is not always straightforward: this aspect of role includes activities such as problem-solving and disturbance handling. Among respondents, however, there is evidence of creativity and flexibility, and a satisfaction with successful outcomes that sustains their self-image as professional educators.

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Figure 2 Modelling the implementer aspect of role

Implementation, the core of the middle manager activity, invites consideration of a large number of facilitators and impediments (see Figure 2). Key

factors include accessibility: of data, of communication, of resources and of people with whom interaction is needed. Understanding—of the college structures and systems, of college bureaucracy, of the role itself—is also essential to implementation. A third set of facilitators depends upon professional expertise: the managers' autonomy and skill in shaping their role, and their ability to use the expertise of the whole team to meet the differentiated needs of their clients and learners.

As with the first aspect of role, the model can be read to give insight into manager activity, and to help define solutions to problems. Reading the facilitator side of this model produces the following proposition.

> If managers are well placed to navigate college systems and structures, they will be enabled in making the personal interaction necessary for the role. Access to data systems, electronic communication and feedback on their role, together with an understanding of college bureaucracy and budget systems will give them the necessary knowledge to carry out the role. The personal interaction and the necessary knowledge, together with clarity given to the role by the college, are used to create and shape the role. Success then depends upon the managers' ability to reconcile the demands placed upon them and to use their own and others' expertise, supported by the respect of others, to carry out the role effectively.

In College B this model is revealing. Here, a strong faculty system prevents easy navigation of the college systems and structures. The effect is principally felt by service and student service managers, but also by the curriculum managers themselves, 'isolated' within their faculties. The college is moving from a transformational style of leadership towards a more transactional one, accompanied by turbulence within the system. The managers' clarity of role and their understanding of the amount of freedom they have to shape it are affected by the change of style and the instability of the college. Reading of the model suggests that middle managers are not well placed to implement effectively, as the managers lack clarity and certainty about their role, and their access to each other is impeded. Once the college has stabilized to its new style of leadership, the clarity and certainty should improve; it would be useful at that point for the college to examine the benefits and disadvantages of its faculty system in order to achieve optimal effectiveness.

In some cases, individual elements in the models are seen to have particular influence. One example in relation to the implementer role is the item 'able to reconcile professional and managerial demands', a feature which is also strongly evident in the literature (e.g. Lumby and Tomlinson, 2000: 139; Pollitt, 1990; Randle and Brady, 1997). In Figure 2, this is linked to a cluster of items concerning the clarity of the role, its position and status within the college, the respect which others pay to the role, the pressures upon it, and the manager's ability to shape and define it at a local level. All of these elements support the manager's professional and managerial understanding of implementation. This understanding may enable the manager to deal with the negative contexts of role ambiguity and overload, of people-centred pressure and systems-centred

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pressure. This single factor can thus be seen to have far-reaching consequences. Further analysis using the models shows that, once the status of the role—not simply the political status within the college, but the status within the manager's own mind—is established, managers would be better able to reconcile the managerial and professional demands placed upon them. This would enable them to benefit from other facilitators: for example, to understand and use the college systems and management structures in order to enact their role, and to gain insight into how to use their expertise and creativity in effective implementation.
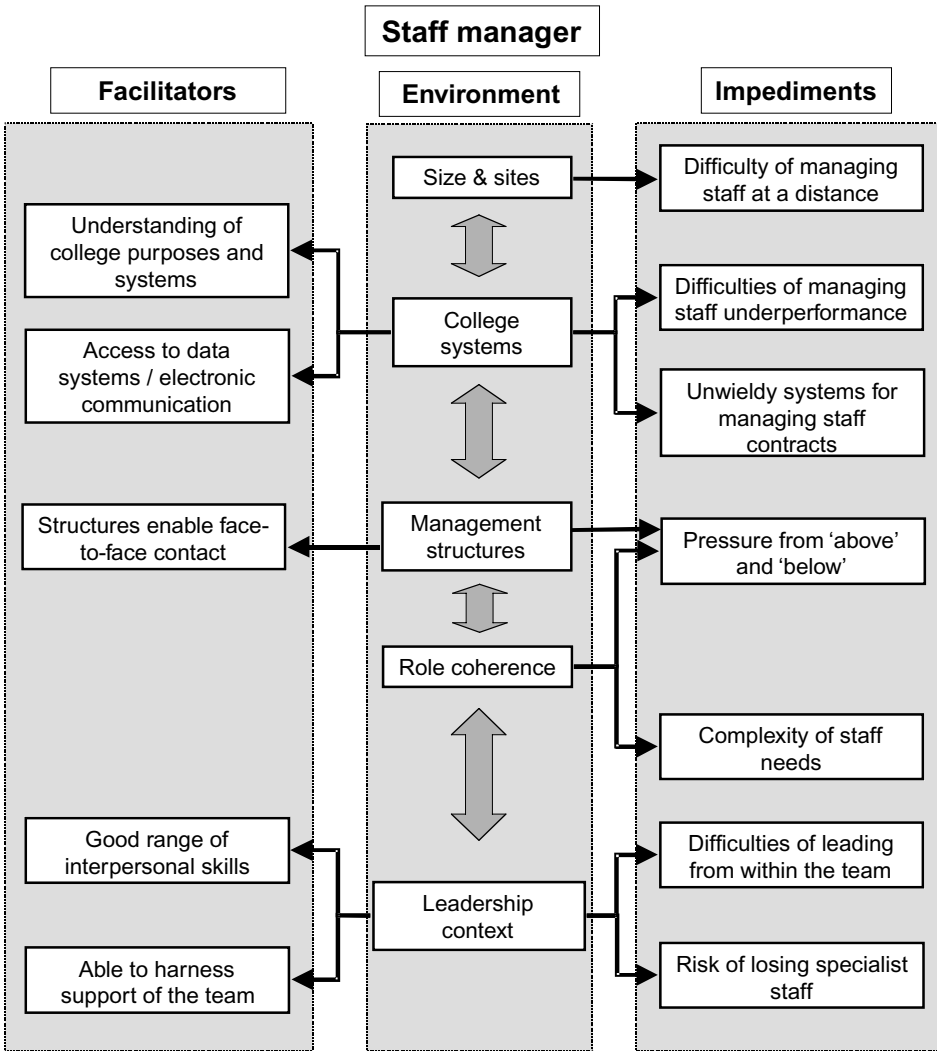
Staff Manager

Staff management in the four colleges is an aspect of role complementary to that of 'implementer': together they enable middle managers to carry out their corporate function. While implementation is largely mechanical, however, staff management is more organic, focusing on managing the differentiated needs of both staff and students. In further education colleges, middle managers are 'the focus of the staff management' (Senior manager, College A). They use the collective expertise of the staff to carry out the work of the department, often by leading from within the team.

In the case studies, the main difficulties with this aspect of role were managing underperforming staff and managing staff at a distance. This reflects the largely intuitive approach to managing staff adopted by many middle managers. Given the many other demands of their role, and the pressure of work among those whom they manage, following a pattern of instinctive social response is often insufficient. Managers speak of having to 'draw back' and to adopt a more rational approach to the role, as well as having to cope with its associated bureaucratic demands. A supportive team is thus essential to effectiveness and, for some managers, to their personal well-being, but in managing the team they not only have to draw upon a full range of interpersonal skills, but to keep this aspect of their role in balance with other responsibilities. Judging and maintaining the distance needed to maintain detachment from those they manage and rely on may not be easy.

Figure 3 models the staff manager aspect of role. The interpersonal elements of the role, which depend both upon the skills of the manager and the support and professionalism of the team, are seen to be the engine which drives this aspect of role, underpinned by college structures and systems. If the mechanical structures of the college are not appropriate, the manager is faced with conflicting demands from the senior management and the team, the classic 'piggy in the middle' situation. To alleviate this problem, colleges might usefully reconsider their management structures, and examine the relationship between the managers at different levels and the departmental teams, including their mutual expectations.

College systems play an equally important function. These become apparent

Figure 3 Modelling the staff manager aspect of role

to staff mainly when they malfunction and become impediments. Managers, concerned to maintain equitable relationships with staff, become frustrated when the systems fail to support them, for example over the issuing of contracts. For curriculum managers, who are most likely to manage staff on a number of types of contract, this element becomes burdensome, putting the role 'out of balance'.

A useful way of evaluating the staff manager aspect of role is to read down the facilitator side of the model.

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> College structures should be set up which optimize face-to-face interaction between managers and their teams, and systems be designed to provide efficient access to data and electronic communication. If the managers then have a good understanding of the college purposes and systems, and a good range of interpersonal skills, they should be able to harness the support of their team and manage staff to the benefit of the college.

If, as the data suggest, the staff manager role is largely undertaken intuitively, managers may not see that their team needs to be managed within the framework of college purposes and systems. They would probably see the need for strong interpersonal skills, but may fail to recognize that they are not making best use of the communication routes available to them. A simple reading of the whole model improves understanding of the context within which staff management is set, and helps to identify areas for manager or whole-college development.

The importance of size and site configuration—and the difficulties of managing them optimally—is illustrated by College A, which operates on four main sites. This college is moving to a largely site-based management system in the hope of achieving three objectives: decentralization of college management, identification of staff with particular college centres and easier access of managers to their teams. The difficulty of managing staff at a distance will be alleviated for curriculum managers (although to a certain extent they were centre-based before the change), and for some student service managers, such as those managing student admissions, who will be responsible for services only on one site. College service managers will have their teams adjacent to them, but will be providing services such as finance and human resources to all sites. As will be seen in the next model, dispersion may affect the college's ability to work as a whole.

Liaison

Liaison, like implementation and staff management, is a means of carrying out the corporate role. Colleges as large organizations have to split their functions, allocating them to different departments, types of manager and team member. For the student to have a successful educational experience, the functions have to operate as a coherent whole. This involves managers in liaison activities, laterally and vertically within the college, and with external agents. Liaison involves an understanding of the systems and communication routes of the organization, as well as skills in negotiation with groups and individuals. It also depends upon mutual respect of other managers' roles.

The mechanical structures of the college do not always promote lateral liaison, and people have to find ways to meet, work together, build mutual trust and create effective patterns of liaison. Vertical liaison is easier to achieve, as it flows with the structures of the college; problems occur here when there are excessive demands from both 'below' and 'above'. Although liaison is difficult to

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achieve, and is impeded at times by both the structures of the college and the attitudes of other managers, most respondents see it as essential to the coherent functioning of the college.

Liaison, as seen in Figure 4, is underpinned by the college's collective ability to work as a coherent whole. Managers are supported in their liaison by easy access to, and co-operation from, teams and managers across the college structure. Modelling this role suggests that liaison is mainly facilitated by systems and potentially impeded by people. In other words, the enabling factors which may exist in the whole-college systems can be impeded by the locally focused systems and purposes devised by other managers. This conflict is evident throughout the model: for example, the manager gains little benefit from proximal location to those with whom liaison is needed if the potential partners in liaison do not trust and value the manager or their role.

Figure 4 Modelling the liaison aspect of role

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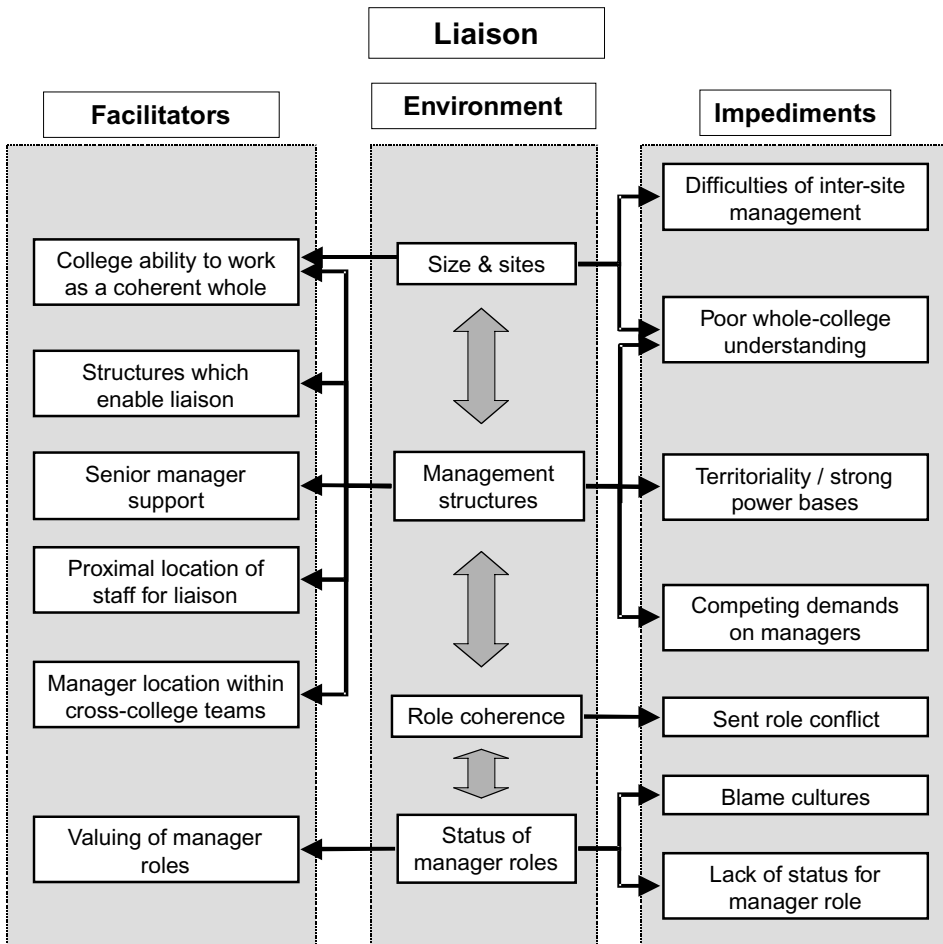
Application of this model can usefully be illustrated by College D. At this college, the curriculum managers, placed within powerful faculties, are accorded respect and status within their role. However, the extent of their power impedes managers of other types, who have little status in the eyes of curriculum managers and receive conflicting, competitive demands from them. Service and student service managers are deterred, and their success impeded, by the power and territoriality of the curriculum managers. The apparent ineffectiveness of the service and student service managers further reinforces the curriculum managers' lack of respect for them. This is eroding the perceived role of service and student service managers, as curriculum managers attempt to 'take over' some parts of their roles. Reading the impediments in the model gives further insight into College D.

> Difficulty of management across the site, or between sites, compounded by attitudes of territoriality and competing demands on manager services, makes a poor basis for effective liaison. The situation may be exacerbated by poor whole-college understanding, which can lead to blame cultures and a lack of status and respect being accorded to the full range of middle managers. Liaison is thus effectively impeded.

If the faculty-based management structures are valued as a framework for the college—and given its educational purpose, this is a reasonable framework to choose—the college needs to address the deficiency in whole-college understanding and the differential values placed upon manager roles. In other words, the college needs to address how it is to work as a coherent whole.

Reading the facilitator side of the model shows that both the management structures and the college operating systems need to offer opportunities for managers to work together: laterally across the manager roles and vertically between senior managers and teams. As was seen in an earlier example at College A, choices have to be made over proximal location which will inevitably enable some liaison routes and block others. This situation can be mediated, as in College C, by managers working together on projects in cross-college, cross-functional teams. The top and bottom items in the facilitator column are crucial: there has to be a unity of college design and a mutual valuing of roles if the different aspects of college function which the various managers represent are to be enabled to work together as a coherent whole.

Leader

Among all the aspects of role, that of leader is potentially the most contentious, not least because the term 'leader' is little used in further education colleges. The size and complexity of further education colleges, however, tend to necessitate systems of dispersed leadership, where middle managers can lead substantial areas of provision, and delegate to leaders of operational teams.

Middle managers in this study understand this need for a blend of leadership styles, and for contingent styles of leadership, chosen to suit the individual or

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the situation being addressed. Their comments about how they encourage and develop their teams, offer purpose and direction for their departments, and wish for more time to address departmental development more creatively, show that on the whole they identify with the principles of leadership. They use mission, direction and inspiration (Fullan, 1994) to exert influence over other people to structure the activities and relationships in a group or organization (Leithwood et al., 1999). For some, however, being a manager is seen in terms of 'taking the king's shilling' (Curriculum manager College C), and to contemplate leadership is out of the question. They are impeded by the lack of leadership dialogue within the colleges; by the inter-dependence of manager activity, both vertically and laterally, which may prevent individuals from considering that they have an area of leadership responsibility; and by the pressure of other aspects of their role, particularly day-to-day implementation. However, as Lumby (2001: 12) notes: 'leadership may be embodied in what people do, not what they say' and evidence presented here suggests that middle managers both individually and collectively contribute to the whole leadership of the college.

The leadership aspect of role is modelled in Figure 5. It is strongly influenced by the attitudes of the middle managers towards their role, and the attitude of senior managers towards dispersed leadership. If leadership is not acknowledged by the middle managers, it may be enacted, but will not be carried out with any focused reflection on this aspect of their role. Leadership at middle manager level is more likely to be encouraged under senior manager leadership that is transformational, which encourages dispersed leadership through stimulating followers to adopt new perspectives on their work and improving awareness of the collective vision or mission, than in a transactional leadership environment where leadership relationships are based upon the requirements and rewards for agreed tasks (Bass and Avolio, 1994). It is useful in this context to consider the contrasting situations at College A and College B.

In line with its restructuring to site-based management, College A is moving towards a dispersed, transformational, leadership style, in contrast to the transactional style which was evident at the time of the research visits. It seems that very few of the facilitators presented in the model were strongly evident under the previous style of leadership. Under a new system, managers may relate better to the principles and practice of leadership, and they already show awareness of a range of leadership styles; however, the other facilitators may have to be developed upon a small existing base. Transformational leadership will take time to establish and be understood, and encouragement for creativity and innovation will need to be fostered if the managers are to accept their new roles in a more transformational system. Happily, the college currently presents a 'stratified' leadership structure, with middle managers favouring a transformational approach; this may enable the change to be seen as offering better conformity with the managers' own value systems.

In contrast, College B is moving from a transformational approach, based upon perception of a common understanding of underpinning values, towards a more

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**Figure 5** Modelling the leader aspect of role
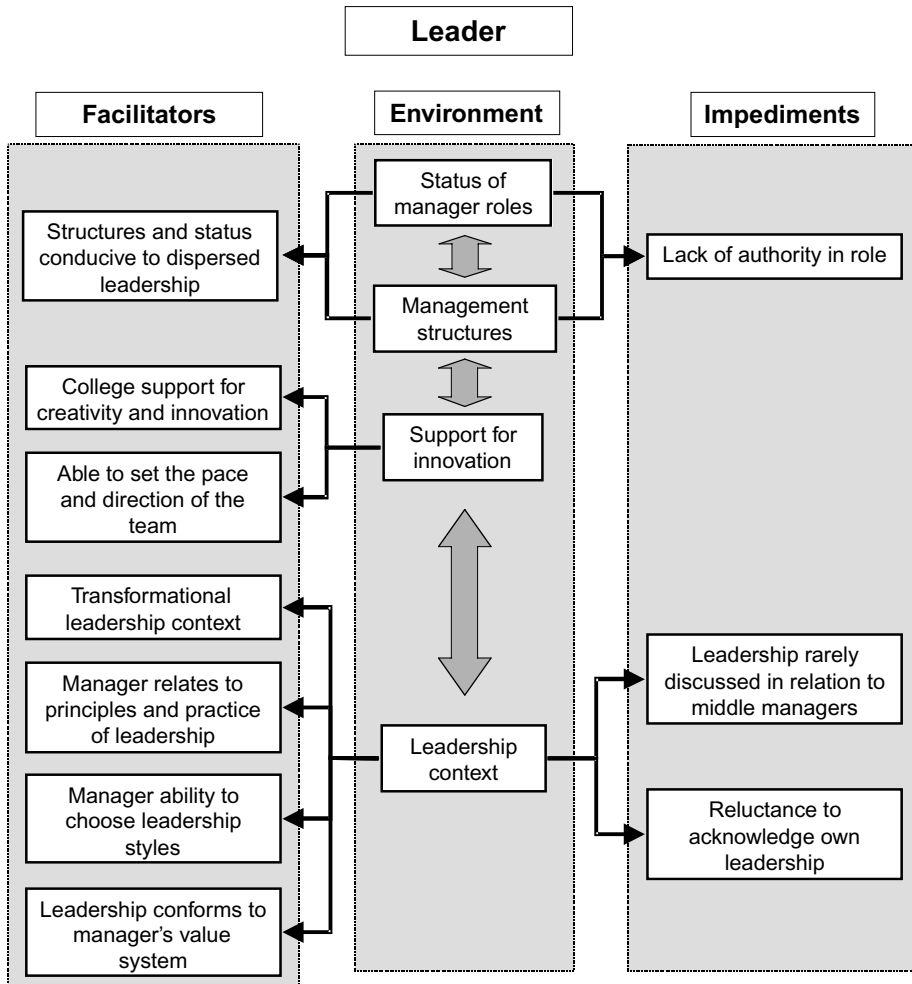
transactional approach, which offers better security for the college as a business. This move implies an increasingly insecure basis for dispersed leadership in a college where 'local' organic structures have prevailed. It may be that the strong directional leadership at present being developed to pull the college away from its various crises will be valued, and that the resulting loss of individual autonomy may be seen as a small price to pay for increased security. Once the college is secure, it may, like College A, revert to more dispersed organic systems. For the individual managers, the turbulence is likely to impede their already tenuous perception of their own position as leaders. Their focus is more likely to fall upon their other, more visible, aspects of role, and the leadership aspect may be the last to emerge within the new college environment.

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Modelling Whole-College Coherence

The five separate models of role presented enable understanding of the various elements of the middle manager role and the factors that influence them. To provide a more integrated and complete picture of role and its interaction with the college as a whole, the various facilitators and impediments have been combined within a single, overarching model. The full range of facilitators and impediments in the first five models were collected together, and underlying concepts concerning the college environment were identified which determine the manager's role. These are shown in Figure 6.

This model represents the college-based context within which the manager role is enacted. Around the centre, the main proximal determinants of role are identified. Outside these, a series of more distal determinants or driving forces are recognized. These offer a means of interpreting pressures upon the role, and of solving problems concerning college design and manager interaction. As presented here, the model suggests that the role is defined and circumscribed by the college structures in which it is placed. It is served, well or badly, by the design of the systems in operation at the college, and by the manager's position in relation to understanding the college as a whole. The role is also defined by people: by the expectations of members of the role set and by the value which

Figure 6 Modelling the middle manager role within the college environment

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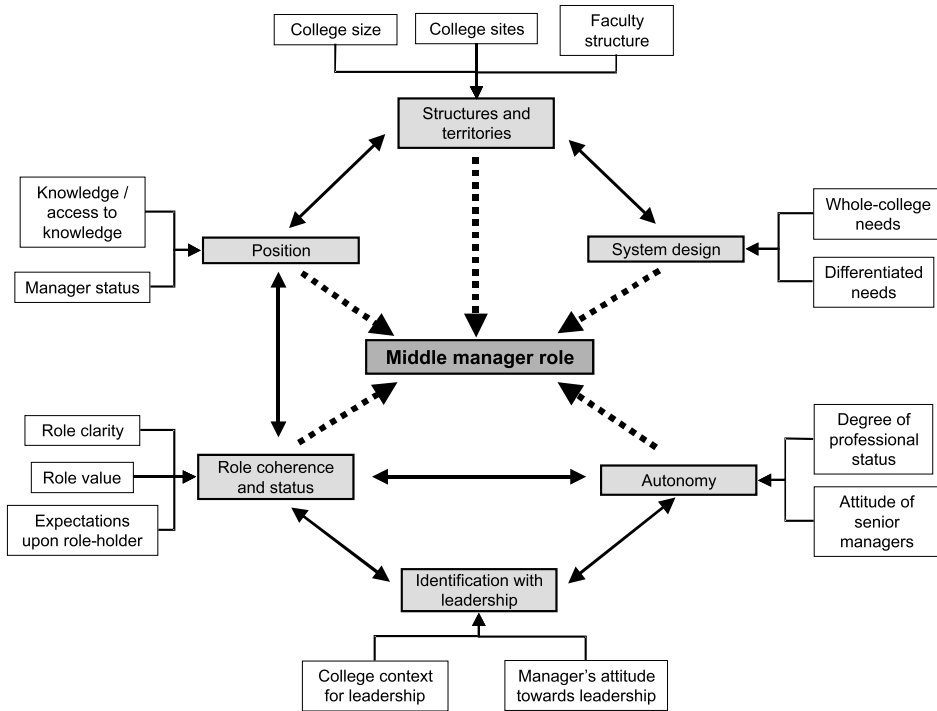
they place upon the role. It is governed by the degree of autonomy and the extent and nature of leadership which the role-holder experiences. These concepts will be considered more fully.

Structures and Territories

The management structures are those indicated on the college's management charts, often in hierarchical form, together with the informal substructures which operate around and across such hierarchies. Territories are geographical, functional and micropolitical locations within the college, which provide 'home bases' for both staff and students. The case study colleges demonstrate a need to operate both through mechanical structures, with a hierarchy of control, authority and communication, and through organic structures, where control, authority and communication operate as a network (Burns and Stalker, 1961). They thus show some affinity with 'radix' organizations described by Schneider (2002), which have fluid and permeable boundaries, and an emphasis on lateral relationships across functions. Individual territories may occupy places in this network, but the more territorial they are, the less well the network functions.

The present study concurs with Brown et al. (1999) and Earley's (1998) findings in schools that the structure of the organization is important in enabling collaboration and liaison. Managers are facilitated by the design and operation of the college management structures and territories: where structures and territories are difficult to navigate, staff management, liaison and implementation are all impeded. Territorial barriers exist where there is differential status between managers, where working practices are not mutually understood, and where one or more of the parties is unwilling to co-operate or difficult to locate. Structures which engage managers in cross-college networking for specific purposes, and which enable face-to-face contact for team management and liaison are important in reducing territorial barriers. The managers' effectiveness is also enhanced when they are well enough placed to understand whole-college accountability, values and purpose, and can apply their own professional knowledge in implementing them.

System Design

Networks which both follow and cross the college structures and territories are provided by the college operational systems. These are often created by middle managers and are routinely used by them, particularly for staff management and implementation. They enable, and in some cases replace, routine decision-making, and facilitate communication, data transfer and administration. Ideally, the systems support both efficient and effective management, and enable implementation of both whole-college and departmental activities. Managers feel that they are impeded when there is excessive bureaucracy and where systems of reporting or data acquisition are cumbersome; this may make

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them reluctant to comply, especially when they do not relate to the rationale or purpose of the system. They value systems which are clear and consistent, and which help them in their work by offering easy access to information or support. This research shows that systems offering communication and access to data and information present particular problems. The system may be well set up, with easy access to what is needed, but if the manager does not have the time to access, respond to and use what is communicated, the system is perceived to be failing. Thus, system design may be 'blamed' owing to problems of manager overload. Comments from respondents indicate that colleges need to keep systems under review, resolving tensions where they occur, to enable the organization to function coherently (Bennett, 1995).

Position

The concept of 'position' is related to Bordieu's (1990) term 'field'—the structured system of social positions which provides the set of power relations within which a person acts. Managers may be in key positions to acquire and to use information, and to act influentially. Earley and Fletcher-Campbell (1989) and Busher and Harris (1999) consider that middle managers occupy a powerful position through their 'brokerage' of information, which offers them the potential to be entrepreneurs and to effect organizational change and improvement. Data from the present study indicate that where managers are in a position to understand and contribute to whole-college values and purpose, they find their own role easier to understand. They may also be in a position to question and change college practice. Where they occupy a less influential and informed position, they may lack access to other parts of the college, keeping their focus on the local operation of their department and the contiguous areas of the college. This isolation impedes liaison, including their accessibility to others, which in turn reinforces their lack of influence and understanding.

Role Coherence and Status

A fourth key factor in the environment for management is the coherence and status of the manager role. Coherence of understanding between different members of the role set, together with absence of overload, makes the role potentially viable; role status within the hierarchies and value-systems of the college and respect for the manager enacting the role make it possible for the manager to act effectively. In this study, role ambiguity and role overload are common features of the managers' situation. Ambiguity is caused through changes in college policy and direction not being communicated effectively enough to this 'layer' of management, and in some cases by confusion between middle managers working in complex college structures as to where responsibility lies. Managers also experience role conflict, particularly where there is difficulty in reconciling the needs of senior managers and their team. Overload

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is mainly seen in terms of lack of resource, which results in the manager having too many managerial and operational tasks to perform, and through attempting to shield members of the team from overload.

Curriculum managers are the most likely to have the status needed to perform their role; service and student service managers can be less fortunate in this respect. Colleges are highly dependent upon sound financial management and effective student support, but in practice there is still differential manager status at most of the case study colleges. This supports Lumby's (2001) judgement that further education 'support' staff are acquiring new status owing to their professionalized function, but that an egalitarian 'one staff' approach has yet to be achieved in colleges.

Autonomy

The fifth factor is the degree of autonomy accorded to the manager: the 'space' within which they can apply their specialist knowledge and expertise to carry out the role. In this research, senior managers speak of having to find the balance between empowering middle managers and monitoring their work to ensure compliance to college strategy; they also report that some managers do not adopt a sufficiently autonomous stance towards their role. Both senior and middle managers link autonomy in role with access to resources: without resources, the manager is not empowered to act. Middle managers generally report that they experience autonomy in their role which is necessarily limited, and the constraints of compliance and of resource may make them content with small degrees of freedom. However, managers speak with enthusiasm about shaping and developing the work of their departments, using their professional expertise to keep up with—and ahead of—new trends and requirements; the main constraint upon these activities appears to be a lack of time, rather than a lack of freedom.

Identification with Leadership

The manager's identification with leadership is shaped by the prevailing attitudes to, and understanding of, leadership within the college. Both senior and middle managers at the case study colleges observe that both transactional and transformational leadership are needed for the college to cohere and prosper. However, under systems of transactional leadership, directive mechanical systems prevail, autonomy is likely to be limited, and dispersed leadership little acknowledged. In a transformational leadership context, organic systems are likely to predominate; managers may feel confident and autonomous in their role, and may identify with dispersed leadership. The middle managers' identification with leadership therefore depends upon the extent to which transformational leadership is acknowledged and practised at the college. The ambivalent attitude of the middle manager respondents to the concept of

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leadership in this study is indicated in Figure 6 by the lack of an arrow directly linking this element of the system to the role: leadership may be enacted through the managers' perception of the status of their role and the degree of autonomy experienced, rather than by any strong perceptions of themselves as leaders.

Conclusions

Middle managers in further education colleges carry out multifaceted tasks within complex and changing environments. The process of synthesizing, generalizing and conceptualizing their experience from the data sets collected has enabled a number of insights to be presented: first, a typology of the generic FE middle manager role, based upon the experience of respondents and shaped by insights gathered from the literature. Second, the research has offered, through modelling, ways of considering the five aspects of role within their college context, which enables better understanding of the role and of potential for improvement in its performance. Lastly, the final model invites a consideration of the role within its whole-college environment, which offers insight into aspects of whole-college coherence. If the middle manager role is the one around which the work of the college articulates, then factors which impact positively or negatively upon the role may be considered as key factors for whole-college coherence. Understanding of these factors at an individual college level is essential. The sector itself is not coherent: colleges differ widely in their types of provision and mix of funding sources, and government policy on post-compulsory education changes rapidly. The main opportunity for coherence is therefore at college level. The research indicates that, in a complex college environment, coherence is difficult to achieve: the concept is offered therefore as a possible 'ideal type', to enable evaluation of current college environments, and to stimulate further dialogue and research.

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