

Middle Managers as Agents of Collaboration

SUMMARY

This briefing puts forward policy recommendations around the role, behaviours and management practices of middle managers working in collaborative environments – complex settings that require cross boundary governance, management, policy and practice.

Middle managers in this working environment are particularly influential because of their unique position in the organizational hierarchy, coupled with their staff management and budgetary responsibilities.

The book on which this briefing is based (see right) draws on empirical evidence from research in Wales and relevant material from the UK and internationally. It examines the extent to which, if any, managing within organisations is similar to, or different from, managing between organisations in collaboration and concludes with a discussion of the implications of the research for public policy and practice, particularly in relation to education, training and learning and development strategies for middle managers.

Findings and policy recommendations are outlined below.



Middle Managers as Agents of Collaboration by Paul Williams is published by Policy Press, July 2019.

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KEY FINDINGS

- **Working in collaboration is a critically important feature of modern public service management.** The plethora of complex ‘wicked issues’ bombarding modern societies can only be resolved by actors and organisations working together.
- The cadre of middle managers working in organisations has a **transformational role** to play in its effectiveness by virtue of their status, power and control over people and budgets.
- The nature of collaborative management practiced by middle managers can be broadly distilled into three interrelated themes – **managing for common purpose, managing complexity and interdependency and managing relationships.**
 - Managing for common purpose concerns the processes necessary to envision and negotiate future direction.
 - Managing complexity and interdependency lies at the crux of collaborative management – the ability and knowledge to understand linkages, flows and relationships between problems, financial frameworks, policies, roles, responsibilities and ultimately to outcomes.
 - Developing and sustaining personal and professional relationships with a wide set of actors and stakeholders both within and external to their own organisations is indispensable.
- The book attempts to resolve the question of whether managing within the spaces of individual organisations is the same as managing in collaboration. Sadly, it concludes that there are **contested positions around the contrasts and comparisons.** One school of thought considers that management is indeed different largely because of contextual reasons relating to form, structure and purpose. Another suggests that management skills and behaviours are equally applicable in either context particularly in organisations that are highly fragmented by profession, division or geography.
- There are a **set of skills and competencies that are needed to be effective managing in collaboration.** The acquisition and deployment of these have implications for public policy, practice and training. Competency frameworks are a useful tool in setting out expectations of the role, and a number of particular practices have been found to be beneficial as part of management development programmes, particularly secondment, mentoring, inter-agency rotations, capacity building programmes and collaborative communities of practice.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

There are a number of important key and interrelated messages that emerge from this book for public policy and practice as follows:

- **Middle managers have a critical role to play in the formulation, delivery and evaluation of collaboratives outcomes** – influencing the shape of the collaborative effort as a whole, and ensuring that their own individual organisations are both receptive to, and fit for purpose, for delivering their particular contribution.
- **Managing in collaboration requires skilful management based on a combination of knowledge, experience, expertise, skills and competencies**, especially building and sustaining effective personal and professional relationships including networks; facilitating and working in teams; communication and conflict resolution; influencing, negotiating and consensus seeking in pursuit of shared purposes; and, having collaborative knowledge based on connections and interdependencies.
- The **most effective middle managers working in collaboration** will be those who can appreciate the motivations and aspirations of their partners; tolerate the heightened sources of risk emanating from the tensions and dilemmas of personal, professional and organizational accountabilities; and have a propensity to demonstrate innovation and creativity.
- Middle managers working in a collaborative environment need to be developed and supported by **effective education, training and development programmes**. These can include inter-professional training, mentoring, secondments, job rotations and communities of practice.
- Middle managers performing leadership roles and functions should adopt **shared, dispersed and distributed approaches**.
- Whilst the effectiveness of middle managers working in collaboration is hugely influenced by their individual capabilities, **their role and management needs to be framed within a supporting and enabling collaborative infrastructure** of organisational policies, co-ordinating mechanisms, financial frameworks, accountability and performance structures and culture. Mechanisms need to be in place to motivate, incentivise, performance manage and reward middle managers operating in collaborative settings.



ABOUT THE BOOK

This important book examines the role, behaviours and management practices of middle managers operating within the context of collaboration – complex inter-organizational and multi-sector settings that demand cross-boundary governance, policy and practice to tackle challenging contemporary societal problems and issues.

Presenting new evidence and offering perspectives from both the public and private sectors, the author critically explores the main themes that are integral to the management challenges facing this cadre of managers.

The book sets out the implications of this research for policy and practice and offers practical recommendations to policy makers and managers working in this area.

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