



Article summary:

Successfully managing change through  
a strong middle management –  
**FROM CONTINUAL FLOW  
HEATER TO STRONG LEVER  
OF CHANGE**

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## **Introduction**

This is a summary of an article that was published in the journal *Der Betriebswirt* (The Business Administrator), No. 1, 2013. It presents the results of several years of research, which dealt with the role(s) and influence of middle management during cultural change processes in organizations. As part of an action research strategy, a medium-sized company was accompanied during a radical change process (structures, processes, organizational culture). The consideration of organizational culture is a success factor in change processes (Cameron & Quinn 2006; Kotter 1996; Neubauer 2003). Many authors have concentrated on top management, which is thus relatively well studied. In general, the focus has been on the overall importance of management.

An explicit study of middle management in this context so far appears to be missing. To reduce this gap, different methods were used for data collection: qualitative interviews at different times with representatives from all levels of the company, two employee surveys and participatory observations on various occasions. During the process, middle managers themselves were interviewed, as well as higher and lower levels of management and staff, resulting in a 360° view.

In parallel with the data collection, an investigation of the maturity of the middle management tier within the studied organization was conducted and subsequently further developed. In this way, it was possible to complement the top-down approach of top management by a middle-outward strategy, which explicitly involved middle management in the process as an independent formulator. By the end of the research phase, it was possible to determine that the organization had not only successfully overcome their structural change, but that the organizational culture had been demonstrably changed in a time span of less than two years.

In the existing research literature, a time span of at least seven years had previously been considered realistic (e.g. Kraus et al. 2004). The results of the study clearly indicate that middle management is an important factor in this process of change and assumes a variety of different roles. If this important group can be won over and further developed within organizations, it can act as a catalyst for cultural change processes and can be instrumental in leading the organization to a successful outcome. It is likely that this observation also applies to other change processes as well.

### **1. Organizational culture as a success factor for change processes in companies**

In everyday work, it appears that organizational culture lags behind daily business operations. However, if organizational culture is an important factor for success or failure, as many authors have noted (e.g. Alvesson 1990; Bate 1994; Deal & Kennedy 1982, 2000; Neubauer 2003; Peters & Waterman 1982), questions concerning how to influence this culture are therefore of great importance. This also raises the question of whether one can change a culture that may already have existed in a particular form for many years and, if so, how? How can success be achieved if the underlying economic conditions facing an organization allow little time?

Although opinions vary as to the definitions of 'organizational culture' (Alvesson 1990; Bate 1994; Neubauer 2003; Sackmann 2006; Saunders et al. 2009), as well as access to it (Hatch 1993; Hatch & Cunliffe 2006; Sackmann 2006; Schein 2004; Trice & Beyer 1993), the topic is still of great interest today.

The finding of Peters and Waterman (1982) that successful and outstanding organizations were built on a visible system of values, led many organizations to intensively engage with their culture, resulting in mission statements and visions being developed. Among others, the

results of a 2007 study by the Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs shows that it is still useful to deal with this issue today. Of respondents in the study, only 77% were satisfied with their jobs; 23% reported that their satisfaction level rather decreased in the three years prior to the study; only 18% said that their satisfaction level had increased. Only 31% declared themselves really motivated by their work and by the organization that employed them.

As ever, the quality of work and social factors played an extremely significant role. Because of this, these issues represent a strong cause for businesses to invest energy in the 'lived' organizational structure (as already confirmed by Alvesson 1990 and Frost et al. 1985). Other studies (e.g. Leidl and Sackmann 2010) indicate that, at the time of the survey, 89% of top managers regard the consideration of organizational culture as either important or very important. When asked about the future, 97% of top managers involved in the study took this view. Middle management also agreed with this assessment (60% and 88% percent respectively).

## 2. What is organizational culture and can it be deliberately changed?

The concept of culture confronts us today in many different ways, and with it a variety of perspectives on how to change organizational cultures. These different perspectives are reflected in the different research approaches.

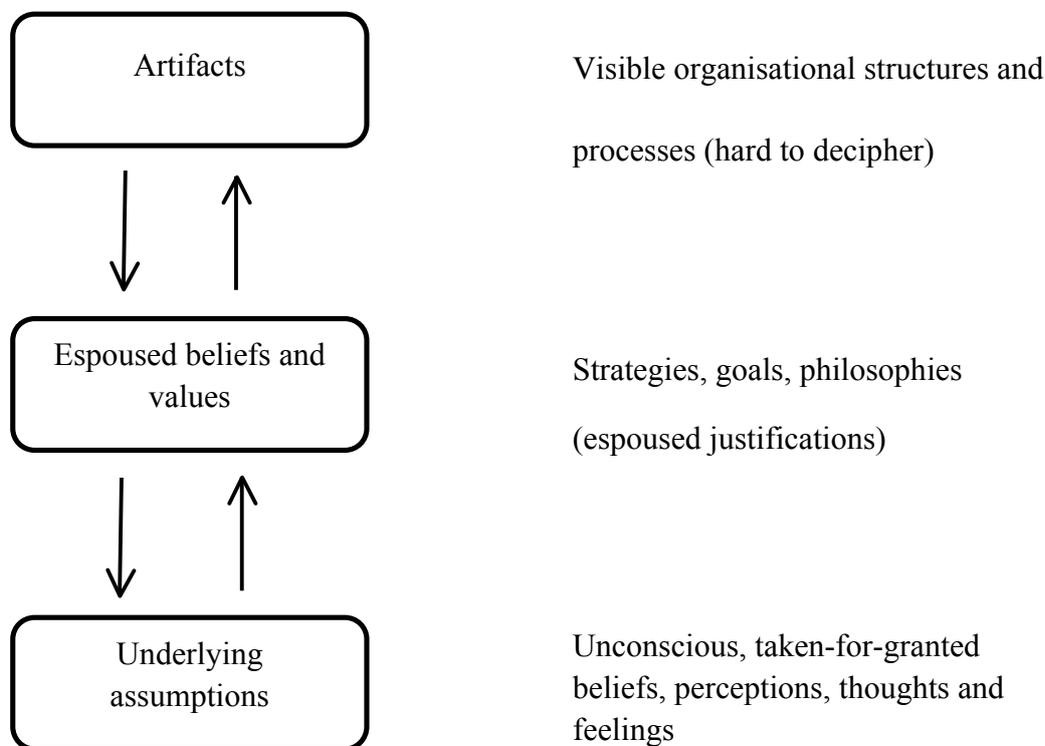
**Table 2.1 Perspectives on culture within organizations**

	<b>Culture as variable</b>	<b>Culture as metaphor</b>	<b>Culture as dynamic construct</b>
<b>Assumptions about culture</b>	Culture is an organizational variable that can be manipulated	Culture is a metaphor for understanding life in organizations; organizational reality is socially and symbolically constructed	Culture is a dynamic construct; organizational reality is socially constructed and organizations produce culture (including cultural artifacts)
<b>Paradigm</b>	Social factist/rational-mechanistic	Interpretative	Pluralistic
<b>Predominant interest in culture</b>	Manipulation, e.g., managing, controlling and changing the relevant culture variable for best performance	Deep and rich understanding of a particular cultural setting with a focus on organisational symbolism	Understanding the cultural context of an organisation for effective culturally-aware management
<b>Assessment of culture and its purpose</b>	Focus and questionnaires and visible tolls to identify (sub)variables that can be manipulated	Ethnography, story-telling, in-depth interviews, discourse analysis to render rich descriptions of a particular cultural setting	Multiple methods: qualitative and quantitative; perceptions and observations; triangulation

(Sackmann 2006, pp. 23-24)

There are currently many definitions of organizational culture (Nieswandt, 2012 and 2013). For a detailed analysis, we refer to this publication. Many of these definitions have common aspects, such as the basis of common understanding or beliefs. A frequent and often-used operational definition by practitioners is “the way we do things here” (Sackmann 2007 p. 25).

Schein’s ‘three-level’ model was first published in 1985 and is today one of the most commonly used definitions. He described three levels: artifacts, feelings for the ‘right thing’ and assumptions.

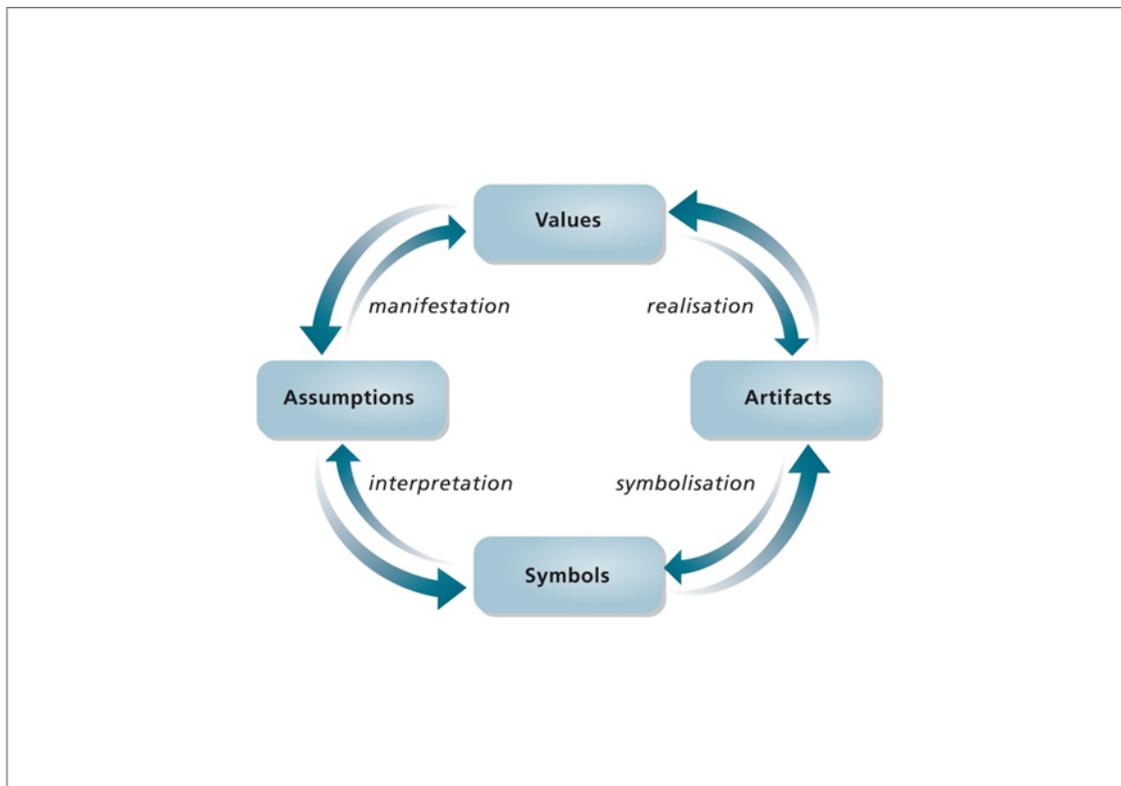


(Schein, 2004, p. 26)

According to Schein (2004), these three levels have a reciprocal influence. Organizational culture is thus not a fixed but a dynamic construct. The third level is the base (Schein 2004): the “ultimate source of values and action” (p. 26). For Schein, the reason for the many different definitions of organizational culture seems apparent in the fact that these levels are often not sufficiently delineated (2004).

His model illustrates why researchers like Weisinger and Salipante (2000) criticize too narrow a perspective on organizational culture and the idea of easily workable change. Since the underlying beliefs are partly unconscious, an attempt at cultural change cannot be made using a simple intervention, performed in the same way as the introduction of a new process chain or computer program. At the same time, however, this does not prevent the possibility of change. It is simply complex.

In his model, Schein (2004) considered the mutual influence of the three levels. This means that changes on one level always have an impact on other levels. This dynamic view was taken from researchers such as Hatch (1993) and Sackmann (1990). They all advocate a dynamic cultural perspective.



(Hatch 1993, p. 686)

According to Hatch's (1993) model, organizational culture underlies a dynamic process and is subject to constant transformation (manifestation, realization, symbolization, interpretation). These transformations may occur in two directions. Change processes rely on these transformations.

### **3. Why organizational cultures change**

Reasons that make a change or adjustment of the organizational culture necessary can come from both internal and external sources (Sackmann 2007). Macro-economic factors play an important role (Kotter 1996) and such things as a financial crisis, a change in market conditions or new technologies, etc., can also have a significant influence (Kraus et al 2004). This means that there will also be the need for such changes in the future.

Hatch's culture model (see Figure 2.X) shows the close relationship between values and activity. Thus a change in the organization is simultaneously influenced by the organizational culture and influences it in return. This also shows that organizational culture is an aspect that does not take place in separate cultural workshops and the development of guidelines or quantitative surveys. Organizational culture must actually be given consideration during every organizational action. Operative action and organizational culture are related and are not separable.

There is general agreement in the literature on cultural change that it should begin with a cultural assessment, on the results of which subsequent decisions about change design should be based (Deal & Ken Kennedy 2000; Hatch 1993; Kobi & Wüthrich 1986; Neubauer 2003; Schein 2004; Schuppener 2006). Schein (2004) proposes a five-step change design. These five steps reflect Lewin's three stages of change (1947, 1951, 1958): unfreeze – movement – refreeze.

Sackmann (2007) argues for a culture-conscious management and presents a range of possible interventions. Cultural change is often initiated from above, using a top-down approach, and activities with staff are intended to support this bottom-up process, as is usually recommended in the literature of change (Doppler et al. 2002). A middle-outward strategy (Schuppener 2006) involves middle management as a driver of the change process. Since the position of middle management involves contact with both the top management as well as the operational level (Glietz 2011; Mantere 2008), some authors see great potential in this group in terms of strategic change in organizations. This raises the question of the extent to which this potential can be applied to cultural change and whether it might not also be possible to shorten the changeover time for cultural change without compromising its sustainability and depth.

#### **4. Middle managers: layer of resistance or agents of change?**

Although top management obviously plays a crucial role in the success of change processes (Kaplan & Norton 2001; Kobi & Wüthrich 1986; Kraus et al. 2004; Neubauer 2003; Schein 2004; Simon 1990; Vahs & Leiser 2003), such consideration is also fraught with risk. What happens when the top management or parts of it leave the organization? Furthermore, does this theory necessarily reduce other stakeholders to passive objects of leadership?

To date, middle management has received little consideration in research (Huy 2002; Wooldridge et al. 2008). According to Smith (1976) and Chandler (1977), the responsibilities of middle management are mainly operational. Their role is to communicate processes and strategies to operational teams, coordinate them and monitor implementation. In addition, middle managers are clearly given increased responsibility through reorganizations and decentralization (Glietz, 2011). This leads to changing requirements and the need for more strategic thinking and activities (Glietz, 2011).

According to Brians (2007) and Rauh (1990), middle management is one of the most critical success factors during restructuring. At the same time, the weight of research on this group is still very low (Wooldridge et al. 2008).

If middle management is viewed from a neutral perspective, it can be said that they basically have the potential to exert either a functional or a dysfunctional influence on change. It is likely that this also applies to cultural changes that have not yet been explicitly considered from a cultural perspective.

In the context of strategy changes, four roles of middle management have been identified in the literature (Burgelman 1983; Floyd & Wooldridge 1992; Mintzberg 1978; Mintzberg & Waters 1985; Wooldridge et al. 2008.). These roles are: Implementer, Synthesizer, Champion and Facilitator and bring with them specific expectations (Mantere 2008).

Because of the close relationship between strategy and organizational culture, it seems likely that these roles and general conditions are at least in part applicable to the change in culture. Glietz (2011) also sees the roles as Multiplier and Role Model to be important.

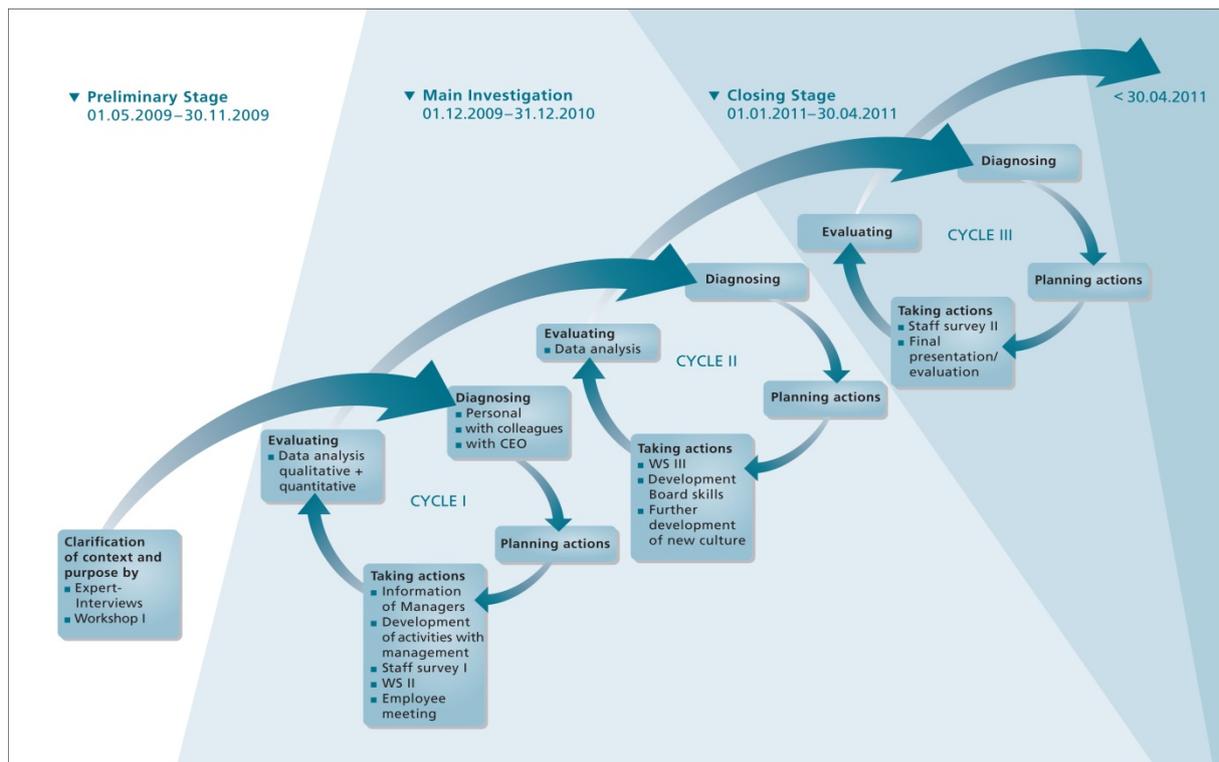
*Middle management can act as a catalyst to accelerate and reinforce the culture change process.*

Previous research results on middle managers suggest that they can very successfully influence the culture change process. This could lead to a shortening of the implementation time required, as well as enhancing its sustainability.

## **5. Research method**

Over a period of two years, a medium-sized company in Germany with about 300 employees was accompanied through a change process. The company found itself in a great state of upheaval, in which – alongside other things – corporate strategy was realigned and the structure of the organization was in part significantly adjusted. The *Denkwerkstatt für Manager* was asked to accompany this process. The proposal to pay special attention to middle management as part of a doctoral thesis and to accompany the organizational culture was gladly accepted.

The method chosen and applied was the action research approach of Kurt Lewin. This strategy provided the opportunity to follow the dynamics and to allow current results to feed directly into the process. Each respective step – diagnosis, planning, implementation of activities and evaluation – was carried out in iterative loops. Each new circle built on the results of the previous circle (Saunders et al. 2012).



(© Nieswandt 2011)

## 6. The results and their significance for practitioners

The aim of the research was to find out whether middle management is actually important for the cultural change process and whether it influenced this change. This was confirmed. The significance was not only evaluated in the context of a self-assessment of the target group, but was also acknowledged by top management, other managers and employees. This led to a 360° view, which was previously unavailable in that form.

To begin with, it was established that an actual change in the corporate culture was measurable in the available two-year period. Conversations after completion of the research have shown that even today – one year after the end of project – this is still visible and there has been continuous development. South Real Estate has successfully performed all the changes and is also economically successful.

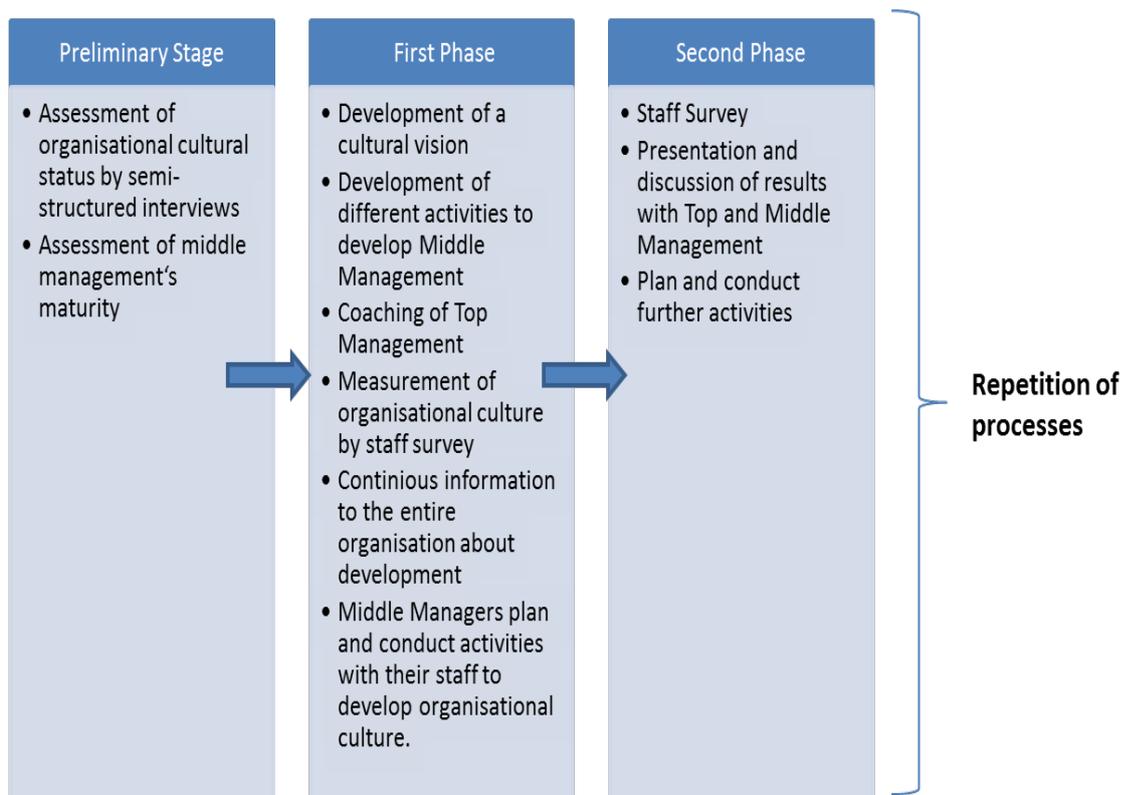
The results confirmed that intensive work with the middle management team and the creation of appropriate conditions have led these people to adopt a culturally aware approach in their actions today. In addition to the roles of implementer, synthesizer, champion and moderator, they have assumed such functions as role models, providers of feedback and cultural activity trainers.

What does this mean in practice? Work with the middle management and the courage to equip them with the necessary expertise and authority has led them to act a catalyst for the cultural change process. As a result, the amount of time needed for the change process has been reduced, while employees important to the organization have remained and are motivated. This saves money and reduces the medium-term disruption that necessarily accompanies change processes.

Work on the maturity of the middle management is an important factor in the successful management of change processes and is an asset to the managers. Simultaneously, a strong middle management is also a big challenge for all involved. They discuss, disagree and make decisions that may even go wrong at times.

## 6.1 The cultural change model

The events that took place during this research project can be used as a model for the design of a cultural change process (Figure 6.1)



(© Nieswandt 2011)

Figure 6: Nieswandt's cultural change model

Here too, a detailed analysis of the starting point for the development of the design change is emphasized. The choice of intervention depends on two aspects: the maturity of the organization and the maturity of the employees. For the determination of the status of the company culture, semi-structured interviews are conducted with a selected representative sample. Semi-structured interviews provide the opportunity, if necessary, to seek and ask for examples and to make observations, which the interviewer can decide to flow into the evaluation

The duration of the whole process depends on the initial position and can be between two and four years.

## **6.2 Maturity measurement according to Nieswandt**

The results of the research have *inter alia* led to the development of M<sup>3</sup> - Mannheim Management Manual – Change®. This instrument assesses the current level of maturity of the managers in terms of their management skills, their performance of roles and tasks, and the basic conditions within the organization.

The results are incorporated into the planning and design of interventions, since the qualification level in each organization will be different, and thus allows for individual planning on the basis of secured data. In addition to the assessment, measurement can also help with respect to a culture change to determine the general level of maturity and to use this for other change processes (not just cultural).

## **7. Conclusion**

This article has shown the importance of organizational culture for successful change processes in organizations and has discussed the role and influence of middle management. The results of Nieswandt's (2001) PhD thesis have established the importance and roles for this cultural process and have been incorporated into a practical model of culture change.

Discussions with many managers following the research project have shown a high level of interest from practitioners in the results, as well as some degree of disbelief. This seems to be

related to personal experiences of failed change processes. For this reason, some managers – a few – have in particular questioned the relatively low time period of c. two years.

However, practical consulting experience within a variety of different organizations has also confirmed the results. In addition, more than a year after completion of the research work, managers from the organization in which this research took place confirm that the organizational culture has changed and that there has been no relapse into old habits. Another scientific study would be certainly of great interest.

## **Dr. Martina Nieswandt**



MBA Martina Nieswandt has worked in the Human Resources field since 1993. She has been self-employed since 2012 and has been a lecturer for the Masters degree in Project Management in Heidelberg-Ludwigshafen ([www.masterpm.de](http://www.masterpm.de)) since 2012. She co-founded the Denkwerkstatt für Manager in Mannheim.

The importance of organizational culture in change processes and the corresponding activities of managers led her to scientifically explore the extent to which middle management plays a role here, and whether they can possibly support the cultural change process as agents of change and thus lead to an acceleration of the process

## **Prof Mark NK Saunders BA MSc PGCE PhD**



Mark Saunders is Professor of Business Research Methods and Director of Postgraduate Research Programmes at the Surrey Business School, University of Surrey, UK. His research

interests include the implications of trust and organizational justice for the management of organizational change, service quality and research methods. He also undertakes consultancy in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors.

Mark is co-author of numerous research articles and books, including *Research Methods of Business Students* (2012, 6th edition, Pearson) and has co-edited the *Handbook of Research Methods on Trust* (2012, Edward Elgar) and *Organizational Trust: A Cultural Perspective* (2011, Cambridge University Press).

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Cinla Akinci is a Lecturer in Organisational Behaviour at the Surrey Business School, University of Surrey, UK. Her research interests centre on the role of intuitive judgement in decision-making and organisational learning. She has undertaken extensive research with the senior management teams of police organisations in the UK. Her research has been published in peer-reviewed journals including the *International Journal of Management Reviews*. Her previous career experience includes Business Development in the finance sector.

**Dr Paul Tosey BSc MSc PhD**



Paul Tosey is a Senior Lecturer in the Surrey Business School, University of Surrey, UK. His research interests include organisational learning and Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). He is co-author of 'NLP: a Critical Appreciation for Managers and Developers' (Palgrave 2009). Most recently, he has been researching 'Clean Language', an innovative coaching practice that is based on metaphor, in which he is a trained facilitator. His career experience over 30 years includes consultancy, coaching and line management.

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