RELATIONSHIP EVOLUTION BETWEEN THE TOP AND MIDDLE MANAGEMENT IN A STRATEGIC IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Lívia Aquino Machado[1]   Maria Elisa Brandão Bernardes[2]   Samir Lótfi Vaz[3]

[1] Master in Business Administration, Fundação Dom Cabral (FDC). Nova Lima, Minas Gerais – Brasil. livia.aquino.machado@gmail.com
[2] PhD in Management, Fundação Dom Cabral (FDC). Nova Lima, Minas Gerais – Brasil. mariaelisa@fdc.org.br
[3] Doctor of Business Administration, Fundação Dom Cabral (FDC). Nova Lima, Minas Gerais – Brasil. samir@fdc.org.br

Abstract

Objective: The purpose of our study was to investigate how the relationship between top and middle management occurs during a strategy implementation in a crisis context, more specifically the one triggered by Covid-19 virus.

Methodology/approach: The approach used was a single, in-depth case study. We adopted a process perspective, which considers the sequence of events and choices made over time, at multiple levels and units of analysis. We analyzed documents and interviewed members of top management, middle management, operational management and two consultants working in the investigated company. We then seek to identify instances of action and interaction where patterns could emerge.

Originality/Relevance: There is an increasing number of studies about the role of middle management in the organizations strategic process, but there are still few empirical studies in crisis contexts. This study investigates strategic implementation process during the Covid-19 crisis, shedding light on dynamics of control, relationship and autonomy involving top and middle levels of management.

Main results: We identified that the Covid-19 crisis enabled the closer approximation of top management with the middle managers, intensified by Crisis Committee meetings in the organization. The crisis management also catalyzed the process of reducing ambiguities and opening up senior management for the presentation and acceptance of ideas from the middle echelons.

Theoretical/methodological contributions: Our findings contribute to the literature on crises, revealing both the process of strengthening relationships between top and middle managers, as well as the building content from the contributions of the middle managers, which can lead to a superior result. We also endorse the impacts of the facilitating conditions proposed by Mantere (2008) based on the work of Floyd & Wooldridge (1992), even in the context of crisis. We also endorsed the proposals by Macpherson, Breslin and Akinci (2021) on the role of middle managers as connectors for initiatives in extreme situations that, otherwise, would not have visibility.

Social contributions / for practice: For practice, we launch additional clues in favor of greater openness of top managers for the participation of middle managers in the implementation and strategic adaptation, even in a context of crisis. Similarly, we demonstrated that extreme crisis contexts are prone to rethink interorganizational structures and relationships, aiming at the renewal of management strategies and roles.

Keywords: Covid-19. Crisis. Strategy implementation. Middle managers. Top management.

EVOLUÇÃO DO RELACIONAMENTO ENTRE A ALTA ADMINISTRAÇÃO E MÉDIA GERÊNCIA EM UM PROCESSO DE IMPLEMENTAÇÃO ESTRATÉGICA NO CONTEXTO DA CRISE DO COVID-19

Resumo

Objetivo do estudo: Investigar a evolução da relação entre a alta administração e a média gerência na implementação de estratégia em contexto de crise, mais especificamente a crise desencadeada pelo Covid-19.

Metodologia/abordagem: A abordagem utilizada foi de estudo de caso único, em profundidade. Adotamos uma perspectiva processual, que leva em conta a sequência de acontecimentos e escolhas feitas ao longo do tempo, em múltiplos níveis e unidades de análise. Analisamos documentos e entrevistamos membros da alta administração, da média gerência, da gerência operacional e dois consultores atuando na empresa investigada. Buscamos então identificar instâncias de ação e interação onde poderiam ser revelados padrões temporais.

Originalidade/Relevância: É crescente o número de pesquisas sobre o papel da média gerência no processo estratégico das organizações, mas ainda existem poucos estudos empíricos em contextos de crise. O estudo realizado investiga um processo de implementação estratégica durante a crise do Covid-19, lançando luzes sobre dinâmicas de controle, relacionamento e autonomia envolvendo os níveis da alta e média gerência.

Principais resultados: Identificamos que a crise do Covid-19 viabilizou a maior aproximação da alta administração com a média gerência, intensificada pelas reuniões do Comitê de Crise na organização. A gestão da crise também catalisou o processo de diminuição de ambiguidades e abertura da alta administração para a apresentação e aceitação de ideias vindas dos gestores intermediários.

Contribuições teóricas/metodológicas: Nossos achados contribuem com a literatura sobre crises, ao desvendar tanto o processo do estreitamento das relações entre alta e média gerência, como a construção do conteúdo das contribuições da média gerência, que levaram ao resultado superior. Foram corroborados os impactos das condições facilitadoras propostas por Mantere (2008) a partir do trabalho de Floyd & Wooldridge (1992), mesmo na crise. E também as propostas de Macpherson, Breslin e Akinci (2021) sobre o papel dos gestores intermediários como conectores de iniciativas que não teriam visibilidade, em virtude da situação extrema. Portanto, contribuímos empiricamente com a literatura que reconhece a importância da construção de uma relação de cooperação entre a alta e média gerência para a implementação da estratégia com flexibilidade e alcance de melhores resultados organizacionais.

Contribuições sociais / para a gestão: Para a prática, lançamos pistas adicionais em favor da maior abertura da alta administração para participação da média gerência na implementação e adequação estratégica, mesmo em contexto de crise. Analogamente, demonstramos que contextos extremos de crise são propensos para repensar estruturas e relacionamentos interorganizacionais, visando a renovação de estratégias e papéis gerenciais.

Palavras-Chave: Implementação estratégica. Média gerência. Alta administração. Crise. Covid-19.

EVOLUCIÓN DE LA RELACIÓN ENTRE ALTA DIRECCIÓN Y LA GERENCIA INTERMEDIA EN UN PROCESO DE IMPLEMENTACIÓN ESTRATÉGICA EN EL CONTEXTO DE LA CRISIS DEL COVID-19

Resumen

Objetivo: investigar cómo se produce la relación entre la alta dirección y la gerencia intermedia en la implementación de la estrategia en un contexto de crisis, más concretamente la desencadenada por el Covid-19

Método: usamos un caso único para entenderlo en profundidad. Adoptamos una perspectiva de proceso, que tiene en cuenta la secuencia de eventos y actividades realizadas a lo largo del tiempo, en múltiples niveles y unidades de análisis. Analizamos documentos y entrevistamos a miembros de la alta dirección, mandos intermedios, dirección operativa y dos consultores que trabajan en la empresa investigada. Luego buscamos identificar instancias de acción e interacción donde se pudieran revelar normas temporales.

Originalidad/Relevancia: Cada vez son más las investigaciones sobre el papel de la gerencia intermedia en el proceso estratégico de las organizaciones, pero aún existen pocos estudios empíricos en contextos de crisis. El estudio realizado investiga un proceso de implementación estratégica durante la crisis del Covid-19, arrojando luz sobre las dinámicas de control, relación y autonomía que involucran a la gerencia intermedia y la alta dirección.

Resultados: Identificamos que la crisis del Covid-19 posibilitó el acercamiento de la alta dirección a la gerencia intermedia, intensificado por las reuniones del Comité de Crisis en la organización. La gestión de crisis también aceleró el proceso de reducción de ambigüedades y apertura de la alta dirección a la presentación y aceptación de ideas de la gerencia intermedia.

Aportes teóricos: Nuestros hallazgos contribuyen a la literatura sobre crisis, al revelar tanto el proceso de fortalecimiento de las relaciones entre mandos medios y altos, como la construcción del contenido de los aportes de la gerencia intermedia, que condujeron al resultado superior. Se corroboraron los impactos de las condiciones facilitadoras propuestas por Mantere (2008 con base en el trabajo de Floyd & Wooldridge (1992),), incluso en la crisis, así como las propuestas de MacPherson, Breslin y Akinci (2021) sobre el rol de la gerencia intermedia como conectores de iniciativas que no tendrían visibilidad, en virtud de la situación extrema.

Aportes Sociales/Gestión: Para la práctica, lanzamos pistas adicionales a favor de una mayor apertura de la alta dirección a la participación de la gerencia intermedia en la implementación y adecuación estratégica, incluso en un contexto de crisis. Del mismo modo, demostramos que los contextos de crisis extrema son propensos a repensar las estructuras y relaciones interorganizacionales, con el objetivo de renovar las estrategias y papeles gerenciales.

Palabras clave: Implementación estratégica. Gerencia intermedia. Alta dirección. Crisis. Covid-19.

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Introduction

The crisis triggered by the pandemic of the new coronavirus destabilized the entire strategic process of most organizations. Indeed, events that escape everyday experiences are tough to deal with (Christianson; Farkas; Sutcliffe & Weick, 2009) because they demand flexible and fast solutions on which the very survival of organizations depends on the unforeseen. Understanding how organizations reacted to the crisis is a unique opportunity to help us better prepare for similar situations (Rouleau, Hällgren, & de Rond, 2020).

When it comes to how organizational leadership deals with crises, although the literature on middle management is fruitful in exploring its strategic role in the face of organizational tensions (Barton & Ambrosini, 2012; Kieran, MacMahon, & MacCurtain, 2020), including the effects of their interactions with top management members (Ateş, Tarakci, Porck, van Knippenberg & Groenen, 2020; Heyden, Fourné, Koene, Werkman & Ansari, 2017), few studies have focused on investigating such dynamics in extreme contexts, such as war, terrorism, and natural disasters. These studies are now beginning to proliferate in light of the current Covid-19 crisis. A recent contribution in this area is that of Heyden, Wilden, and Wise (2020). They have shown that to navigate this crisis, rather than cutting costs by eliminating managerial positions, top management can benefit from enabling radical change initiatives by middle managers. Such findings suggest that interactions between middle management and top management can shed light on the ability of organizations to prevent and/or deal with extreme contexts, whose consequences often result in "an extensive and intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological or material consequences" (Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio, & Cavarretta, 2009, p. 898). In this context, we seek to contribute to the reflection by asking about the evolution of the relationship between top management and middle management in a strategy implementation process, particularly in the context of the crisis instituted by Covid-19.

We depart from a theoretical basis according to which there are expectations of roles to be played by middle management in the strategy, which can be stimulated or inhibited, depending on the reciprocal behavior of top management (Mantere, 2008). In this way, our contribution to the theory derives from exploring the strategic implementation roles, both of top and middle management, when facing a major societal challenge.

We carried out a single, in-depth case study in a medium-sized company operating in the industrial electromechanical assembly that was impacted by the unfolding of the crisis instituted by Covid-19. The methodology consisted of document analysis, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation with managers from different hierarchical levels of the organization. Our results demonstrate that the crisis made it possible to get closer between the extracts of the leadership, besides a greater openness of the top management for the presentation of ideas proposed by the middle management.

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We have structured this article into four main parts. First, we summarize the main theoretical perspectives supporting the research on the interface between top and middle management in strategy. Second, we present the methodological aspects that allowed us to give robustness and reliability to the study. Third, we report the main emerging categories of analysis through a narrative about the investigated case. Fourth, we developed the discussions and conclusions of the results, including possible limitations and recommendations for future studies.

Theoretical background

The traditional view in the field of strategic implementation placed the main responsibility on organizations for formulating long-term plans for the CEO, directors, board of directors, and other top members (Andrews, 1971; Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Generally located two or three hierarchical levels below these actors (Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990), the understanding was that it was up to middle management to only enable the execution of plans. Otherwise, they would be regarded as "saboteurs" (Guth & MacMillan, 1986). That explains the predominance, at the time, of a perspective focused on structural control, contemplating the extensive use of systems, incentives, and rewards by top management (Galbraith & Nathanson, 1978; Hrebiniak & Joyce, 1984). Overtime, a more "adaptive" view of implementation began to recognize the role of middle management in allocating resources in favor of autonomous initiatives that emerge at the bottom of the hierarchy (Bower, 1970: Burgelman, 1983), an important aspect of the formation of emergent strategies (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Mirabeau & Maguire, 2014) and organizational adaptation (Burgelman, 1991; 1994). Such antagonisms between the "traditional" and "adaptive" views are now moving towards an "integrative" view of strategic implementation, which depends on roles and joint interaction between top and middle management (Raes, Heijltjes, Glunk & Roe, 2011; Canales, 2013; Heyden et al., 2017; Vaz, Bernardes, Bulgacov & Milagres, 2021). Therefore, in this article, implementation is understood as a shared dynamic, which involves communication, interpretation, adoption, and enactment of strategic plans (Noble, 1999; Weiser, Jarzabkowski & Laamanen, 2020).

Some studies represent milestones in proposing this integrative vision of strategic implementation. For example, in a comprehensive literature review, Wooldridge, Schmid, and Floyd (2008) suggested that individual factors such as position in networks, social capital, and the base of relationships with top management influence middle management's strategic performance and, consequently, the understanding and people's commitment to implementation efforts. Then, Raes et al., (2011) indicated that upper and middle management affects the quality of decisions and strategic implementation, either through the performance of specific roles in each group or through the ability to negotiate and mutual influence during episodes of interaction between them. Heyden et al. (2017) advanced this knowledge construction by organizing different managerial roles to initiate and execute strategic changes in organizations and by demonstrating that both roles can be exercised by both upper

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and middle management. Recently, Splitter, Jarzabkowski, and Seidl (2021) showed that the broader inclusion of employees in developing new strategies could intensify the difficulties that middle managers face in implementation. Therefore, the integrative view of strategic implementation presents solid and growing foundations for scholars who wish to delve deeper into this literature.

More specifically, implementation involves a system of social exchanges (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976), in which the roles to be played by top and middle management depend on the conditions of the external environment (Floyd & Lane, 2000) and the capacity that the two groups of managers have to act on the market structures and social structures in which they are inserted (Mantere, 2008). This system develops because, to carry out strategies, top and middle management constantly exchange information (Raes et al., 2011), promises (Sull & Spinosa, 2007), and responsibilities (Sillince & Mueller, 2007), creating reciprocal roles expectations that each should assume to compensate for the benefits received in their relationships (Gouldner, 1960; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Vaz, Raes, & Heyden, 2022). The external environment is considered to influence these social exchanges not only because of the functionality of strategic roles in face of market demands but also because of the pressures for changes that can generate conflicts in relationships involving both groups of managers (Floyd & Lane, 2000). At the same time, it is recognized that members of the top and middle management are agents with the knowledge and act reflexively, being able, therefore, to transform (albeit partially) aspects of the external environment and the very expectations of roles deposited on them (Mantere, 2008).

We need to emphasize, as a theoretical assumption, our understanding that managerial roles represent a different level of abstraction from that commonly observed by other functions or job positions. While people perform their tasks in dynamic environments, suffering pressures to be responsive to the demands of multiple stakeholders, formally prescribed work obligations are insufficient to allow the adaptation of individuals' behaviors to particular situations (Katz & Kahn, 1978).

In this research, we start from a conceptual model that presents four expectations of strategic roles to be played by middle management in the strategy implementation (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992), which can be frustrated or satisfied, depending on eight mutual conditions (descending and ascending) to be exercised by top management (Mantere, 2008). Descending: narration; contextualization; resource allocation; respect; trust. Ascending: responsiveness; inclusion; refereeing. Based on the premise of favoritism, Mantere (2008) identified four conditions that refer to the expectation of implementing the strategy in the relationship between top management and the middle manager: when the objectives built at the top denote continuity of the work; when there is a contextualization of the descending objectives to be implemented; when sufficient resources are allocated to support the achievement of objectives; and, when top management shows respect for day-to-day problem-solving.

According to Mantere (2008), based on Floyd & Wooldridge (1992), initially, there is the expectation that the middle management implements the deliberate strategy. That is the first role that encompasses the interventions made by them to align the actions of individuals with collective intentions

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in the organization. For middle management to fulfill this role, top management needs to use narration, sharing the logic of strategic thinking; contextualization through links between the strategy and relevant work contexts; resource allocation, authorizing changes in daily work, and respect, recognizing the value of everyday activities. The second strategic role placed on middle management is synthesizing information, which involves how such managers interpret, evaluate and transmit data and events internal and external to the organization to top management. In this sense, it is up to top management to demonstrate responsiveness, give feedback, and communicate about the success and failure of past actions. Third, middle management is presumed to play a role in facilitating adaptation, which occurs when such individuals promote flexible organizational arrangements in favor of strategy, experimenting, and creatively developing new work activities. Such a role is associated with the counterpart of trust from top management, which is expressed by encouraging new ideas and adopting open communication regarding the successes and failures of experimentation. The fourth and final expected middle management role is to advocate for alternatives. This role appears when such managers use unrelenting communication with top management, seeking to persuade them about strategic options that have the potential to impact the future of the organization (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992). Thus, for middle management to defend alternatives, top management needs to include them in planning activities, combined with the ability of top management to refereeing and react to new ideas (Mantere, 2008).

More specifically, in the context of crisis, Wenzel, Stanske, and Lieberman (2020) identify studies of four categories for organizations responding to crisis: retrenchment, persevering, innovating, and exit. According to this classification, our research is interested in the situation of perseverance in a crisis. However, it is noteworthy that our study did not aim to investigate how the organization responded to the Covid-19 crisis but to understand how its management impacted the relationship between top and middle management in an ongoing strategic implementation process.

Bundy, Pfarrer, Short, and Coombs (2016), in their literature review on crisis management, warned about the incipience of the field. The authors classified the studies surveyed so far according to the adoption of an internal or external management analysis perspective. Approaches from an external perspective focus on the organization's relationship with external stakeholders and on managing their perception of the crisis and its consequences. On the other hand, studies that adopt an internal perspective consider that crisis management involves the coordination of complex systems, design of structures, and impact reduction to learn from crises. More specifically related to the theme proposed here, the authors point out that the findings on crisis leadership are still not very specific and very focused on the role of the CEO (Bundy et al., 2016, p.1672), explaining little about the relationships between leaders in this context.

We know little about how the roles played by leaders are affected in a crisis. Research by Dwyer, Hardy, and Tsoukas (2021) identified a certain paralysis of middle managers attributed to the anxiety generated by the crisis. The study by Heyden et al. (2020), specifically linked to the Covid-19 crisis, explores the potential for reversing strategic roles between top and middle management. According to

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the authors, in these cases, middle managers fight fire with fire: "meeting radical imposed change with radical chosen change" (Heyden et al., 2020, p. 311). They identified companies that started to give more autonomy to middle managers and include them in important strategic decisions dealing with the crisis. Their results led us to conclude that the ongoing crisis could impact the strategic roles to be played among the groups of agents located at different hierarchical levels, as well as the relationship between them. These changes allows, for example, more contribution from middle managers in strategic matters and new ways of acting on the part of top managers.

Research methodology

To undertake the research, we used the process study approach (Langley, 1999; Pettigrew, 1992). Such a perspective treats organizational strategy as something not "static", but considers the sequence of events and choices taken over time, considering who did each activity and when these facts happened (Langley, 1999). In this sense, "process research focuses on understanding how things evolve over time and why they evolve in this way" (Langley, 1999, p. 692). Such an approach involves multiple levels and units of analysis, also seeking to understand the relationships between micro and macro levels and how such relationships contribute to change the organization (Pettigrew, 1992). More specifically, the approach is close to what Abdallah, Lusiani, and Langley (2019) called the History of Performative Processes, as the concern was more with identifying the "specific instances of action and interaction that reveal the phenomenon studied in the making" (Abdallah et al. al., 2019, p. 100), looking for patterns.

Thus, a single descriptive case study was carried out, which sought to understand a complex social phenomenon that happens in the ambience of the organization but which can also allow for a holistic perspective of reality (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2015). The primary sources were the main ones used, and the main collection technique was the semi-structured interview. An analysis of available documents was carried out as well. According to Yin (2015), documents are relevant sources of evidence, both in sharing and crossing data obtained through other techniques. The analysis of the collected documents aimed to triangulate data and still gather new information or evidence. The documents analyzed were: Strategic Map, Minutes of Internal Strategic Planning Meetings, Minutes of Meetings and Information from the Crisis Committee, Organizational Chart of the company, and Strategic Indicators Reports.

The organizaton chosen was a medium-sized enterprise (here called Alpha), operating in the area of industrial electromechanical assembly and fulfilled the requirements of having a recent strategic planning process, starting with execution; having an allegedly active middle management group; be working to combat the effects of the Covid-19 Crisis with possible impacts on its strategy. In addition to the objective criteria, the company's top management was interested in the results that could be found in this research and left the doors open for whatever was necessary to capture data.

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Data were collected in September and October 2020. The first stage was carried out through 11 semi-structured interviews, in a non-face-to-face manner, with an average duration of 40 to 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded (with authorization) and transcribed, generating 175 pages that facilitated categorization and analysis.

Two members of the top management (identified as A1 and A2), four middle managers (I1, I2, I3, and I4), three operational managers (O1, O2, and O3), and two external consultants (C1 and C2) were interviewed. Only one member of the leadership was not interviewed (one of the operational managers) because he was on sick leave. Data collected in interviews and documents were analyzed and categorized using the content analysis technique (Bardin, 1977; Bauer, 2002). Two groups of categories were used. The first was composed of the four roles of middle management in the implementation of the strategy, according to the typology of Floyd and Wooldridge (1992): (i) implementation of the deliberate strategy, (ii) synthesis of information, (iii) defense of alternatives, and (iv) facilitation of adaptability. The second group of categories was composed by the eight facilitating conditions of the middle management agency, proposed by Mantere (2008): (i) narration, (ii) contextualization, (iii) resource allocation, (iv) respect, (v) trust, (vi) responsiveness, (vii) inclusion, and (viii) refereeing. Throughout the analysis of the narrative we sought to identify which excerpts referred to the period before the crisis and which were related to crisis management (from March 2020). The results are presented below.

The case of the alpha company: context and process

The researched company was founded in 2014. Its opening was based on the sum of the technical experience of several engineers in the area of industrial electromechanical assembly. The founders had extensive technical knowledge in engineering and company operations, but they did not adopt strategic planning practices nor define a hierarchical structure with a composition of top or middle management positions. In the company's early years, management was based on the technical approach of the founders and the trust relationship established between them and the construction teams.

In 2017, due to revenue growth, the founders decided to restructure the company creating middle management positions without being able to fill them by internal selection. Therefore, they brought from the labor market managers who began to occupy intermediate roles and started the first negotiations between top management and middle management. As reported by interviewee A1, in the view of top management, this restructuring was necessary at all levels of the organization. As a result, according to him, the opening of middle management positions brought to light the need for better-established processes, as it became evident the need to offer objectives and goals to the new leaders that would guide them towards sustainable growth and operational excellence maintenance. Another member of top management, A2, reported that at that time, the movement being carried out by the company aimed at creating a basis for sustainability that could guide its growth. He pondered that the company, as a

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service provider, required diversification of customers, possible change in operations, and being more prepared for market fluctuations. According to the two interviewees, the first project of this new phase was hiring a asset valuation specialized company, whose growth projection provided was fundamental for the hiring decisions that followed, seeking to achieve the projected numbers effectively.

In 2018, they hired a Human Resources consultancy firm to assess existing leaders. The report pointed out, among others, the need for strategic alignment. Therefore, in 2019, they hired another consultancy firm to conduct the strategic planning process. The planning was carried out through individual interviews, meetings, creative workshops, lectures and, training. The Strategic Map of the company was created, as well as indicators and guidelines defined for its monitoring. Until the arrival of the Covid-19 crisis the plan's directions were followed. All 11 interviewees, who represent three different hierarchical levels of the company, reported that, in the workshops conducted by the consultant in the strategy area, they felt the opportunity to have an open word and that everyone was able to share their experiences. According to the president (A2), in these strategic discussions, the importance of some actions was also clear-cut: defining limits on the performance of top and middle management; delimiting fields of action for each position; review the matrix of responsibilities in the company's growth.

According to the interviews, there was a moment after the constitution of the middle management layer when the top managers still overlapped decision-making, generating ambiguities in the process with situations of command duplicity. Thus, middle managers found themselves confused as they received orders from both directors, which resulted in an excess of tasks and difficulty prioritizing. As they reported, they felt suffocated by top management, besides having little autonomy to deal with their subordinates. This situation, dealt with in meetings and workshops, was addressed through an agreement based on the prerogative that, for middle managers to gain relevant space in the company's strategic process, there was a need for a change in the performance of the top managers. It was also clear that the existing ambiguities in the direction of middle managers needed to be solved by the Directors. This vision triggered the top management changes in the organizational structure, changes that were accelerated in the context of the Covid-19 crisis. The then director A2 became president of the company, while the other director A1 took over the management of the Advisory Board of Directors.

The adoption of the new strategic map began in October 2019. The company acquired a graphic management system, the "*Klipfolio*" and adopted the OKRs (*Objectives Key Results*), a method for setting goals and monitoring results. To monitor the OKRs, meetings were held between top and middle managers, where three key objectives of the Strategic Map were chosen to be initially focused: i. Assertive Budgets, ii. Good Practices in Project Management (both linked to internal processes), and iii. Continuing Training (linked to growth).

It was at the beginning of the implementation of the chosen objectives that the first outbreaks of the Covid-19 virus were recorded in Asia and Europe. On February 26, 2020, the first case was confirmed in Brazil (UNASUS, 2020), leaving the company in a state of alert. On March 18, 2020, the mayor of Belo Horizonte decreed the closure of several types of establishments, including service

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provision offices (Lovisi, 2020). The company closed its administrative area and sent employees to work remotely from their homes.

The crisis arrived at the company in an unusual month in terms of management: it was the first time that the two members of the top management had been absent simultaneously for more than 30 days due to vacation. That was interpreted as a sign of the increase in trust in the middle management and evolution concerning the granting of autonomy on their part. Such reflections were highlighted during the interviews with the two directors, consultant C1 and middle manager I2. However, with the onset of the crisis, the implementation of the strategic plan came to a standstill. The strategic objectives in progress were suspended to be rethought, such as the objectives of increasing revenues, growth, expansion of market share, and others. Given the uncertainties related to health, economy, and markets, the first action taken by the top managers was to meet with middle managers to discuss possible impacts. The first decision was, as far as possible, to send to work from home the employees of the central office. The second decision was the creation of a crisis committee, both to monitor changes in the requirements in the protocols related to the health of employees and to develop new strategies for the period. The committee was composed of all members of top management and all of Middle Management, with the support of two external consultants.

In this first stage, which comprised the very short-term initial actions (activities of the first 30 days), the top management, especially the president, took on the exclusive responsibility of deciding on the first directions. In the following months, the middle managers gradually received new saying in decisions. The committee was responsible for analyzing important information, such as statistics related to Covid-19. It sought to assess the impacts of the crisis in the regions where the company operates, aiming to preserve the employees' health and the global statistics that affected markets and prices. Such analyzes focused on iron ore producing areas, given that mining companies were the company's main customers at the beginning of the crisis. As reported in the interviews, the actions taken gave results as quickly as they were decided.

Even in the crisis, the company completely reversed negative expectations for the future and changed its growth perspective: it was conquering more customers, ending 2020 with a portfolio of contracts expected for 2023 only. According to the interviewees' assessment, the remote work leveraged the work of middle management. In the middle of the second half of 2020, when the interviews were carried out, the company produced more, despite still going through the crisis. According to reports and documents, new sectors, such as Marketing and the so-called Strategic HR, were boosted. Thus, the results were BRL 115 million sold in the period studied, against a forecast of BRL 73 million for the same period.

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Analysis and discussion of results

The participation of middle management in the strategic process during the crisis

With the implementation of the strategy starting in October 2019, the interviews revealed that the top management had different expectations concerning the middle management, especially in managing the changes that had begun in the company. There was also the expectation that middle managers would have their delivery power increased with the new structure. According to the perception of top manager A2, there would be a broadening of the view of middle managers. For that to happen, he recognized the need to invest in their individual development, besides providing the necessary support of human and technological resources. It was created leadership development path, one in which a training plan with a duration of approximately six months. A third expectation of the president (A2) was the creation of a Shared Services Center. For him, this sector, in addition to being the responsibility of an middle manager, should provide everyone with management data to enable long-term planning. A fourth expectation referred to the expansion of the customer base. At the turn of the year, before the crisis, the company had a portfolio for only the first half of the year. They needed to guarantee the second half of the year. The reports of all interviewees highlighted the four expectations, which showed that they were communicated and understood by all.

In this context, middle management respondents (I1, I2, I3, and I4) mentioned having received in December 2019, just before the crisis, clear goals from top management, which reflected the deliberate strategy and indicated a specific line of action to be chased. As recalled by Mantere (2008), the establishment of clear goals is crucial because an important constraint in the agency associated with the expectation of implementation is perceived when middle managers are not sure if they have daily relevance to strategy implementation. That's because they did not have access to the top management thinking processes. Middle manager I2 showed that he and his peers were called by top management to align expectations about their role in the strategy implementation. There was also openness to participation through the search for suggestions and opinions from middle and operational managers.

However, as already reported, when the Covid-19 crisis began in March 2020, there was a pause in the deliberate strategy implementation so that new actions could be aimed at the survival of the business. Middle manager I2 even claimed to remember "the moment when they felt their strategy was being overtaken by the crisis". In addition, several interviewees reported that, in addition to the pause in the implementation model, new work tools were adopted that enabled better communication between areas and management controls. From the works operational managers point of view (Interviewed O2 and O3), the communication from the top management for the employees (teams in the works) about the pause in the strategy implementation occurred satisfactorily. Respondents stated that the flow of information about which route changes would be necessary at the time of the crisis was complete.

When asked about their expectations regarding middle management's deliveries in the wake of the Covid-19 Crisis, both directors stated that, despite the anguish, the company did not have an

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environment of despair but of trust, complicity, rapport, respect for the processes, and continuous improvement. They pointed out there was a strong desire from the top management to develop and empower middle management even before the crisis and that this intention remained. The president (A2) stated that he and the other director learned and better understood their responsibilities to support and leverage middle management during the crisis.

The research results are in line with what was exposed by Wooldridge et al. (2008) and Heyden et al. (2020). They state that top management expects middle managers to act effectively in the tactical implementation of change processes. In the interviews with the top managers (A1 and A2), they explained their expectations for middle management to implement new actions before and during the Covid-19 Crisis, which, according to them, were overcome. They presented as evidence of overcoming:

i - the consolidation of the middle management of works, which started to act in the place of the top management, in the conduction of the works in progress and of the operational managers;

ii - increase in the delivery power of middle managers, such as the results obtained with the expansion of the customer portfolio, number of contracts sold, formation of productive operational teams, and customer feedback regarding the performance;

iii - the consolidation of the Shared Services Center, which enabled a better view of the data and the information.

It also identified that the middle managers created, on their initiative, solutions to communicate changes related to the implemented emergency actions, including building an Information Bulletin (with information regarding measures to protect the health of the employees and the new operational guidelines for the period) made available to all administrative and construction management employees. The collected data showed that the middle managers brought new perspectives to the directors, influencing them in an ascending way. In their daily activities, middle managers actively collect information on issues relevant to the organizational strategy (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992). Such managers are expected to select, synthesize, and forward critical information to their superiors (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992; Mantere, 2008). Therefore, the data showed that the role of facilitating adaptability was beginning to be built by middle managers based on changes in the profile of top management.

The 2nd role of middle management, facilitating adaptability, is also top-down by nature. However, it occurs in a very different way from deliberate strategy implementation (Mantere, 2008). That is so because middle management was expected to adapt implementation-related work practices to the changing environment (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992). The data collected in the survey showed that the performance of such a role by the company's middle management was recent since evidence of such behavior was only found after the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis. The reports from members of top management, middle management, and the external consultant (C1) were useful to understand the reasons that led to such a situation.

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Until 2019, the two directors, A1 and A2, worked together to direct all sectors and hierarchical levels of the company. In the company's early years, such action was effective for sharing visions and strategic direction. However, from the formation of new middle management positions in 2017, such performance overlapped in some situations. With the support of the consultancies, it became evident to the top management that for the middle management to occupy relevant space in the strategy, there was a need for the evolution of the performance of the top management itself. Thus, the data collected in the research showed that the role of "facilitating adaptability" began to be built by middle managers based on changes in the action profile of top managers.

Asked whether, in their daily activities, middle managers actively collected information by synthesizing and addressing issues relevant to organizational strategy (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992), the top managers confirmed that their expectations were met from the beginning of implementation, evidenced by the improvement of the medium-term vision through the presentation of action plan up to 2 semesters after the current period. The upward flow of information was also attested by operational and middle managers. The operational manager O3 reported that, throughout the implementation process, he and his peers participated by contributing new ideas and reporting success and failure attempts to superiors. According to the same interviewee, after the establishment of middle management position responsible for the execution of the works, he and his peers began to experience greater freedom to give suggestions and autonomy to solve problems.

Mainly during the crisis, the role of middle management became intense in the synthesis of information. By participating in the Crisis Committee, middle managers began to participate in daily meetings with top managers and brought relevant information that directly impacted decisions related to emergency actions. Three months after the beginning of the crisis, when the top managers had already directed emergency actions, the Crisis Committee was chaired by an middle manager with the support of employees from operational functions.

Finally, the research also identified reports on how middle management played the ascending role of defending alternatives, presenting new ideas that could impact the future of the organization (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992), challenging the established possibilities (Mantere, 2008), observed from the strategic planning and implementation process, before the Covid-19 Crisis. According to the external consultant (C2) report, if certain middle managers had not engaged in defending alternatives, perhaps most of the changes observed in the implementation process would not have taken place.

However, with the crisis, operational managers reported realizing that middle management had greater freedom to bring new ideas and more suggestions for changes during implementation, pointing out assertive participation from the bottom up, defending alternatives, and changing the thinking of the high administration and generating new initiatives that diverge from the deliberate conceptions (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992). Top manager A2 explained that middle managers gained a lot of credibility throughout the Covid-19 crisis management process, helping to rethink the strategy with ideas that complement or even transform the top management vision.

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According to Mantere (2008), the middle manager's role in the strategy would be promoted by conditions of the relationship between top and middle management, identified in the studied process, as shown below.

The characteristics of the relationship between top management and middle management in implementing the strategy in light of Floyd and Wooldridge's (1992) typology, presented here, were summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Characteristics of middle management working in strategy in light of Floyd and Wooldridge's typology (1992)

Middle Management Roles	Typology	Description
Implement the deliberated strategy	Descending and Integrative	Pre-crisis: Middle management growing participation in the strategy implementation since 2018, especially after investments in consulting activities that resulted in strategic planning and consequent implementation in 2019.
		Pre-crisis: Less than three months after the start of the implementation of strategic planning, the Covid-19 Crisis began in March 2020. At that moment, key strategic indicators and their monitoring metrics were still discussed, with the active middle management participation.
		The onset of the crisis: At the beginning of the Covid-19 Crisis, the company's option (top management with the support of the External Consultancy) was to suspend the action plan previously developed, constitute a Crisis Committee and implement emergency actions with high involvement of the Middle Management.
Facilitate adaptation	Descendant and Divergent	Pre-Crisis and Crisis: Middle management activities related to facilitating adaptation are considered recent, as evidence was found only after the onset of the Covid-19 crisis.
Synthesize information	Ascending and Integrative	Crisis: The synthesis of relevant information was verified among members of middle management towards top management and between operational managers and middle management as well.
Defend alternatives	Ascending and divergent	Crisis: After the changes in managerial roles between the two directors, Middle Management started to act with relative autonomy and participate in the setting of actions during the crisis.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

According to Mantere (2008), the role of middle managers in the strategy would be promoted by the conditions of the relationship between Upper and Middle Management, which were identified in the studied process, as will be shown below.

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"Top-down" enabling conditions

i. Narrative

During the crisis, middle managers I2, I3, and I4 reported that they received clear guidelines on which strategic objectives were to be implemented and why such objectives were selected. By forming a coherent narrative with the past (Mantere, 2008), it was also evident that the top managers took care that the middle management was aware that it could improve the strategic process. A dissenting point of view by middle manager I1 reported that when the crisis had begun, it wasn't clear what had motivated top managers to opt for the chosen guidelines. However, throughout the implementation process doubts were clarified.

ii. Contextualization

Regarding the implementation of changes throughout the Covid-19 crisis, it was reported that top managers made an effort to enable "contextualization" condition, linking the company emergency plans to the work carried out by middle managers. This enabling condition was described by middle managers I1, I2, I3, and I4. When he was still an operational manager of works, manager I4 reported having received indicators so that he could contribute to the process from his work station. Managers I1 and I2, on the other hand, realized that throughout the crisis, it was created a sense that strategic direction was effective and present in daily work (aligned with Mantere, 2008).

iii. Resources allocation

Regarding the facilitating condition of resource allocation, middle managers received explicit authorization from top managers to make daily changes to the work. It is a condition that ends up reflecting necessary changes every day (Mantere, 2008). However, the data collected in the research (in the reports and minutes of meetings) made it possible to perceive that the middle managers autonomy to allocate resources is still partial. When needing to allocate resources, whether human or financial, if they are well-grounded and consistent with the strategic directions, they are welcome by top management. However, the company did not decentralize decisions about the allocation of resources since, despite the speeches of confidence on the part of all interviewees, and the frequent approval obtained. In reality, all demands from middle managers need to be submitted to scrutiny of top management.

iv. Respect

The enabling condition of respect is in tune with that of resource allocation because both are related to the ability of top management to see daily work as valuable and meaningful for the strategy implementation (Mantere, 2008). In the various interviews, it was identified the respect for individual

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activities and processes of each middle manager on the part of the Board. However, as already presented, respect is only partially converted into autonomy. The two top managers corroborated these perceptions by reporting that they feel they are in a learning moment about the process of delegating to middle management. Thus, although it is reported that there is a lot of respect for the "stock of knowledge" (interviewee A2) of middle managers and their ability to decide on changes, at the time of implementing strategies, they are not completely autonomous to decide.

v. Trust

Both top managers were emphatic in saying that there is total trust (Mantere, 2008) in the middle management regarding values and technical knowledge. Director A1 explained that throughout the implementation of changes during the crisis, he noticed that they often lacked direction from top management, a situation they tried to correct over time. Both recalled that even before the Covid-19 crisis, taking a vacation for more than 30 days for the first time was a milestone in building a trusting relationship. They also claim to understand that the gradual granting of autonomy to middle managers can be relevant to achieving superior results for the organization. However, it was possible to identify that there are still remnants present in such a relationship, as reported by consultant C1. Such remnants mean that, at times, middle management respondents said they felt little empowered to move forward with ideas without the presence or approval of top managers. In other words, they feel encouraged to propose ideas, but they don't execute anything without the consent of the Board first. They said they still feel insecure when they need to communicate to top managers that some strategic change has failed. That situation shows that trust is not yet a clear condition in the relationship. They claim that communication is transparent and fast, but they still say they are afraid when they need to report failures. The fact that this condition is not that clear to middle management can even impact their sense of creativity and freedom (Mantere, 2008).

Facilitating "bottom-up" conditions

vi. Responsiveness

Through the interviews, it was possible to verify a relatively open and transparent dialogue between the top and middle management. In this sense, top management often encourages the holding of broad forums for the sharing of previous success and failure experiences, thus encouraging openness to the presentation and discussion of ideas, in line with what Mantere (2008) considers, giving a sense of continuity in the work and engagement with the strategy.

Attesting to the dialogic relationship, the middle managers reported that throughout the implementation process during the Covid-19 crisis, they were often able to present ideas and always received feedback about them. Manager I2 said that many times he was authorized to implement a new idea or that he was convinced the idea was not so suitable for what was being discussed at that moment.

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He also pointed out that, at times, top management made it clear that those new ideas could be evaluated in the future.

From the perspective of top managers, this openness and feedback were informally given, but throughout the organizational structuring process, responsiveness was formalized. The Chair (A2) explained that the Board has been striving to become more qualified to analyze propositions and provide increasingly better returns to their subordinates.

vii. Inclusion

Among the eight facilitating conditions by Mantere (2008), "inclusion" was perhaps the most evident throughout the description of the researched data. According to the author's approach, top management invites and expects middle managers to actively participate in strategic implementation, including advocating alternatives, when performing "inclusion" (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992). This facilitating condition was widely identified throughout the analysis of the interviews of all extracts from the leadership, as well as of the two external consultants interviewed. External consultants also noticed that top managers effectively included middle managers, and in contrast, middle managers responded by actively participating in the strategic implementatiob changes during the crisis. In addition, the consultants reported that middle managers delivered good results that even culminated in the company's growth during the crisis. Finally, it was also observed that this condition can be considered as extended to operational managers, who felt included in the implementation process during the crisis, according to reports.

viii. Refereeing

The data collected made it possible to identify the refereeing of ideas by top management in two main moments. The first was during the strategic planning and implementation activities in 2019 and then during the Crisis Committee in 2020. As seen above, the construction of the strategic map took place with the attendance of top management, middle managers, and operational managers in a workshop named "Strategic Reflection Seminar", held at the beginning of the strategic deliberation process, when everyone actively participated with new ideas. Such ideas were judged by top managers (A1 and A2), with the support of external consultant C1, throughout the seminar. That culminated in the graphic representation presented and discussed by everyone again. As pointed out, the map was seen as "ours", "built by everyone".

In 2020, the Crisis Committee was formed by all top and middle managers. The ideas for emergency actions were, at first, directed by the top management in the short term (30 days), but after that, the middle management actively participated with propositions that were discussed and judged by the two members of the top management. In June 2020, three months after the beginning of the crisis, the committee was even chaired by a member of middle management, with the support of operational

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managers. From then on, such decentralization allowed top managers to have more time to devote to strategic activities.

In the light of the framework proposed by Mantere (2008), data presented in this section on the evolution of top and middle managers relationship during the strategy implementation in the Covid-19 crisis are summarized in Table 2. The analysis of the data allowed the design of relevant reflections. It is possible to verify, first, that among the eight facilitating conditions for middle management agency in the strategic process, five were identified as current practices of the top management to middle management, and three were evaluated as partially present. It was also possible to understand that the relationship between top and middle management people went through a period of evolution between 2019 and 2020, with movements of decentralization and delegation of responsibilities to middle managers. Furthermore, it was considered that this evolution took place mainly after carrying out the strategic planning and implementation work with the support of external consultants and was intensified with the Covid-19 crisis and its negotiations by the company.

Table 2

Conditions that facilitate the relationship between upper and middle management in the implementation of the strategy during the Covid-19 crisis, as proposed by Mantere (2008)

Roles of the middle management (Floyd & Woldridge, 1992)	Facilitating conditions performed by top management (Mantere, 2008)	Description
Implement the deliberate strategy	Narrative	During the crisis, middle managers received clear guidance on which strategic objectives to be implemented, as well as the reasons why these objectives were selected.
	Contextualization	Top managers made an effort to contextualize the company's emergency plans with the work carried out by middle managers during the crisis.
	Resources allocation	Suggestions are encouraged and generally accepted by top managers, but middle managers does not have autonomy over the decision.
	Respect	Top management shows respect for operational decisions taken by the Middle Managers and accepts listening to new ideas related to the company strategy. However, autonomy concerning decision-making about changes in strategic routes does not yet happen in the company. Thus, the condition of "respect" was considered partial.
Facilitate adaptation	Trust	Middle Management feels uncomfortable remaining autonomous with ideas without the presence or approval of top management.

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Roles of the middle management (Floyd & Woldridge, 1992)	Facilitating conditions performed by top management (Mantere, 2008)	Description
Synthesize information	Responsiveness	There is an open and transparent dialogue between top management and middle management, including in broad forums in which past experiences of success and failure are shared, with an opening for the presentation and discussion of ideas.
Defend alternatives	Inclusion	This facilitating condition was widely described throughout the data analysis. Both middle managers and operational managers reported feeling included in the implementation process during the crisis.
	Refereeing	The refereeing of ideas by top management was identified in two main moments. The first was during the discussions for building the strategic map in 2019 and then during the Crisis Committee in 2020.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Data analysis allowed us to identify that the three facilitating conditions that are partially present, namely, resource allocation, respect, and trust, are all related to top-down activities; that is, top management activities that could facilitate middle management "from top to bottom" related to the autonomy in the decision making. It is acknowledged that the opening for active participation of middle management in strategic activities of the company is recent (2019 and 2020) and that the relationship between the two hierarchical levels is under construction, especially after the Covid-19 crisis. Such inferences are related to two main facts: first, top management needed to delegate more activities and decisions to middle managers as a result of the growth of the company; secondly, the closeness of the relationship between these managers during the meetings of the Crisis Committee there was an increased. Such results confirmed the findings of Heyden et al. (2020) when they concluded that the crisis should be considered an opportunity to rethink the strategic and tactical roles of top and middle management, with top management benefiting by allowing radical initiatives from the middle managers. And also with those of Macpherson, Breslin, and Akinci (2021) on how middle managers, in relationships of trust and credibility in extreme situations, can enable initiatives aligned with organizational strategy, which under other conditions could remain unnoticed.

The relevant impacts on the facilitating conditions proposed by Mantere (2008) for a better middle management agency were corroborated, even during the Covid-19 crisis. The paralysis mentioned by Dwyer, Hardy, and Tsoukas (2021) was not verified. The interviews' results showed that some facilitating conditions may have developed to a greater degree in relation to the others.

Thus, our case does not fully confirm Heyden et al. (2020) conjectures about how top management can benefit by allowing radical initiatives by middle managers because we identified that, at the time of the research, there remained reticence from top management regarding the concession of full autonomy to them. We believe that, eventually, the organization will be able to evolve in this

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direction: we verified, through the interviews, that there is an understanding by the top management that the gradual granting of autonomy to middle managers would be relevant to the achievement of superior results.

Understanding that the proximity of the relationship in the company studied was already being built we were able to verify more specifically that despite the beginning of the crisis has caused a setback in the relationship - in the molds of Guth and MacMillan (1986) - the instituted crisis committees, forged the resumption of proximity. Although the strategic alternatives that emerged in the sequence cannot be defined as emerging (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985), they were, in fact, conceived by middle management and perfected in the exchange with their superiors (Raes et al., 2011; Sull & Spinosa, 2007; Sillince & Mueller, 2007). In this sense, our findings are similar to those of Macpherson et al. (2021), who identified the role of middle managers, who came from relationships built on trust and credibility with top management, as connectors of initiatives that would not have visibility, with formal organizational systems and structures, due to the extreme situation.

Conclusions

The reported research aimed to investigate the evolution of the relationship between top and middle management in the strategy implementation in the context of the Covid-19 crisis. Therefore, it was intended to understand the characteristics of the relationship between top and middle management in the investigated company. It also intended to analyze and compare the characteristics of the strategy implementation process present during the Covid-19 crisis. Based on these analyses, we sought to evaluate the evolution of the relationship between top management and middle management in the strategy implementation during the Covid-19 crisis in the light of the framework of roles expectations proposed by Mantere (2008). The research methodology used was a single case study in a medium-sized industrial electromechanical assembly contractor located in Belo Horizonte/MG. The period of analysis comprised from the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis in Brazil (a crisis that had not yet ended until the conclusion of this research) to November 2020.

Regarding the characteristics of the relationship between top and middle managers, it is possible to say that the company grew in six years and needed to build more consistent relationships. The former organizational structure (in force until 2018) did not have formal middle management and the directors related directly to operations. At the time of the research, the company had a hierarchical structure organized in functions and attributions, defined from the top management to the operational worker on the floor. The middle managers roles were, then filled with external market professionals and also by operational managers, who started to occupy new important positions in the strategy implementation.

From the study of the process, it was possible to understand that, despite being recent, the middle management position in the company's organizational structure, the relationship between directors and middle managers were being built and improved. However, the data showed that as a result of

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investments in consulting projects, which resulted in a strategic plan and its consequent implementation, both before the Covid-19 Crisis, there was a condition for accelerating the strengthening of the relationship between the company's hierarchical levels.

It was found that the decision to suspend processes and strategic initiatives in force at the beginning of the crisis, taken by top management with the support of external consulting, sought to ensure the survival of the company, based on the mentality of centralizing the control of decision-making by top management. During this period, which lasted about 45 days, those decisions that were considered to be emergent were implemented; in other words, actions that required directions related to the crisis context and aimed at caring for the health of employees, cash, and the continuity of the company.

To develop the short and medium terms new strategic perspectives, high expectations have arisen from the top management regarding the contribution and the active participation of middle managers in this new implementation process. It was found that such changes in the relationship between top and middle management were modified with the crisis, imposing much more speed compared to what had been happening until then. The data conclusion is that the Covid-19 crisis made it possible for top management to become closer to middle management, intensified by the meetings of the crisis committee, in addition to catalyzing the process of reducing ambiguities and greater openness of top managers to the presentation of ideas by middle managers.

The research results thus showed that, according to the analysis carried out in the light of Floyd and Wooldridge (1992), middle management played roles expected by top management related to the implementation of planning. Besides, it is possible to conclude that the expectations reported by top managers during the implementation after the Covid-19 crisis, were met faster than expected.

The first moment, marked by quick actions (two months), made the middle management start to act more actively in the implementation of the strategic directions of the company. As shown in the data, middle managers actively participated in subsequent strategic decisions by being part of the crisis committee. Besides, the data from the interviews showed that during this period top managers came to understand that there was a need to evolve their delegation skills and that there were ambiguities of direction among the members of the top management to be solved.

Therefore, the survey results showed that the Covid-19 crisis might be considered a driving factor of relevant changes in the company's sustainable and orderly growth. On the one hand, the changes in the characteristics of the relationship between top managers and middle managers and, on the other hand, the differences in the content of the strategies, as well as in the implementation process, provided new characteristics of the company's differentiation.

Our findings contribute to the literature on crises by revealing both the process of strengthening relationships between upper and middle management and the construction of content of the contributions of middle management, which led to a better than expected result. The impacts of the facilitating conditions (as proposed by Mantere (2008)) during the Covid-19 crisis were corroborated. Furthermore, some conditions may have developed to a greater degree than others.

We also empirically contribute to the growing literature that recognizes the importance of building a cooperative relationship between upper and middle management, for implementing the strategy with flexibility and achieving better organizational results (Raes et al., 2011; Canales, 2013; Heyden et al., 2017; Vaz et al., 2021).

To the practice, we provide more evidence in favor of greater openness of top management to the participation of middle management in the implementation and strategic adaptation, even in a context of crisis. Indeed, in these extreme circumstances, due to the high risk to which organizations are subject, it is still pragmatically expected that top management centralizes decisions expecting greater control and assertiveness in the strategy. As our study demonstrates, however, the greater participation of middle managers, in addition to strengthening relationships at an important moment, expands the range of thoughtful and viable solutions, with views from another point in the hierarchy (Pickton & Wright, 1998) that can be even more successful.

Despite the contributions listed, it is necessary to recognize the usual limits of a single case study. Nevertheless, we studied an organization in a sector that, although we did not predict it at the beginning of the study, was favored by the crisis (civil construction).

An interesting clue to be explored in future research would be the situations in which the close relationship between top and middle management did not exist even in the embryo and had to be fostered after the crisis. Another interesting path would be researched in sectors that suffered setbacks during the crisis, such as retail and tourism. Considering that the Covid-19 crisis is ongoing, there are several gaps to be filled, and this endeavor is one of the pioneers in relating strategy, top management, middle management, expectations, roles, and facilitating conditions (Mantere, 2008).

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