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Exploring the Leadership-As-Practice of Middle Managers Engaged in Organizational Changes in an Asia Pacific Multinational Setting

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EXPLORING THE LEADERSHIP-AS-PRACTICE OF MIDDLE MANAGERS ENGAGED IN ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES IN AN ASIA PACIFIC MULTINATIONAL SETTING

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ABSTRACT

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There has been a great need for leadership studies on middle management, particularly in the Asia Pacific context. This study explored the leadership practices of middle managers engaged in leading organizational changes of multinational corporations (MNCs), within the Asia Pacific context. Organization ethnography was used as the research method. The ethnographer observed and analyzed the actual practice of middle managers of a multinational manufacturing company located in China for six months. The findings showed that middle managers played significant roles in communication and execution in leading organizational changes. The study also showed that change management could be a dynamic process at the organizational, team, and individual levels. A leadership-as-practice model with four main practices (problem solving, continuous improvement and learning, relationship management, and communication and coordination) was constructed which seemed to be more comprehensive and relevant to the MNC and manufacturing settings. The implications of this study were involving middle managers in strategic planning and leading organizational changes, leadership development of middle managers in leading change, and practicing leading change with sensitivity to the Asia Pacific cultural context. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA (https://aura.antioch.edu) and OhioLINK ETD Center (https://etd.ohiolink.edu).

Keywords: leadership, leadership-as-practice, middle managers, organizational change, organization ethnography

Dedication

This study is dedicated to the top leaders, the middle managers, and all the staff of the research site who trusted and supported me in this ethnographic study. They inspired me with their dedication to performance excellence, innovation, trust, respect, and care for one another. Their transparencies and openness to me during the six-month ethnography surprised me. For that I am deeply grateful, and I hope that this study can become useful to them and other leaders in the future.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In the past 28 years I have collaborated with multinational corporations (MNCs) in Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea, India, and other parts of Asia to provide consulting, training, and coaching solutions to our clients in managing organizational changes. I developed my own version of transformational leadership training without knowing any concepts developed by Burns and Bass (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Burns, 1978) in early 2000, adapting from Kotter's eight-stages of business transformation (Kotter, 1995, 1996). In my experience in collaborating with middle managers (MMs), and in alignment with Wooldridge et al. (2008), many of them felt powerless and helpless during organizational changes. They could not influence their top executives about the direction and strategies of change, and yet they were expected to execute those change decisions and communicate them to their department and team staff. They felt that they were lacking in leadership skills in leading organizational change and in communicating change to their employees. They also did not know how to motivate their staff and engage their employees for performance breakthroughs and mastering career changes during organizational changes in an uncertain business environment. In view of such business needs, I wanted to deepen my understanding in the leadership practices of MMs in organizational change, particularly within the Asia Pacific context, to help multinational corporations operating in Asia Pacific region with better knowledge and skills in leading organizational changes and in empowering their middle managers with good leadership practices.

The Need for the Study on Middle Managers (MMs)

Most of the research into leadership has focused on the top leaders and rightly so because it has been argued that the visions and strategies developed by the top leaders, as well as their personalities and behaviors, do make a significant difference in the organizations or even nations (Burns, 1978). Historically, the view of MMs has been rather negative (Tinline & Cooper, 2016). Dopson and Steward (1990) found that in many management studies a typical middle manager (MM) was profiled as “a frustrated, disillusioned individual caught in the middle of a hierarchy, impotent, and with no real hope for career progression” (p. 3). On the other hand, others suggest that MMs in fact play important roles in day-to-day operations and transformational changes in the organizations (Farrell & Schlesinger, 2013; Floyd & Wooldridge, 2017). In fact, “the middle matters” has become a catch phrase in some organizational behavior research and management training (Heskett, 2021; Schermerhorn et al., 1994; Tinline & Cooper, 2016).

This study will explore the leadership practices of MMs in leading organizational changes of multinational corporations (MNCs) within the Asia Pacific context. In this introductory chapter, I will firstly define what leadership as practice is and how it is different from the traditional concepts of leadership. Secondly, I will define who MMs are, their roles and functions in business organizations, and particularly in MNC settings. Thirdly, I will describe the relationships among culture, organization, and cross-cultural leadership to understand the distinctive cultural and organizational settings of MNCs in the Asia Pacific region. Fourthly, I will outline the theoretical origins of this study. That is, collective leadership, change management theories, and LAP theories. Fifthly, I will also explain why studying leadership-as-practice of MMs during organizational changes is important. At the end of this chapter, I will articulate the research questions and explain the methodological approach of this study, based on the research questions and my positionality of this study.

Leadership-as-Practice

Traditional leadership theories such as transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Burns, 1978) have presupposed a linear relationship between leadership behaviors and organizational outcomes. They do not examine the impact of the roles of the followers, as well as the interaction between the leaders and the team members, on leadership effectiveness and change outcomes. In reality, many top leaders have expressed that they could not control anything in a highly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) business environment (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). It is not sufficient just to explore the personality profiles or behaviors of MMs, however useful or popular it might be in past leadership studies, particularly those related to transformational leadership. The more I work with MNCs in my change management consulting and leadership training as consultant, and the more I run my own small multinational consulting company across Asia Pacific, the deeper is my conviction that leadership is plural, and effective change leadership is collective in nature, not based on one person or a few top leaders.

Leadership-as-practice (LAP) theory not only challenges the person-centered view of leadership to expand to the multilevel view of leadership, but it also argues against the positivist assumptions underpinning mainstream leadership research. It advocates *post-structuralism* as a theoretical basis for the study of leadership, which is very much a social construction of reality that emphasizes language, dialogue, and process of interactions among the leaders, the followers, and the other significant parties under a particular organizational and cultural context (Carsten et al., 2010; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Ford, 2015; Raelin, 2006).

Raelin (2006) aptly asks a very thought-provoking question about the visioning messages of the leaders, “What happens if people in the ranks don’t truly believe the message?” He further points out that within an organization, a meaning-maker is someone who gives expression to what members of the organization seek to accomplish in their work together. Meaning making, according to Raelin (2006), is a collective process more than an individual practice. Such a process of meaning making could be best observed in “communities of practice,” a concept identified by Wenger (1998). These communities of practice assemble their membership on the basis of members’ mutual knowledge and practice. They develop a shared history, values, beliefs, technologies, ways of talking, and ways of doing things (Drath & Palus, 1994). Weick (1995) defines the sensemaking process as one that involves the creation of reality as an ongoing accomplishment. In it, people make retrospective sense of the situations in which they find themselves. The sensemaking of organizational members shapes organizational structure and behavior.

Sveningsson and Larsson (2006) explored middle managerial talk and practice connected to expectations of leadership in a planned corporate cultural change program. They found that a middle manager positioned him or herself in relation to contemporary discourse on leadership, but his/her actual practice in leadership seemed inconsistent with their "fantasies." Therefore, there is a great need to study the *actual* leadership-as-practice of MMs in leading organizational change.

In this study, I will explore what MMs do in their day-to-day interactions, not what they say they would do or should do or what the personality assessments say they might do. Alvesson and Spicer (2014), in *The Oxford Handbook of Leadership and Organizations*, pointed out that there is a shortage of in-depth studies of leadership practices and relations. They further assert that there are limitations of mainstream leadership studies, which are, in most cases, satisfied with questionnaire-based research and interviews conducted with CEOs and managers about their leadership. They advocate that more researchers should look at the "dirty and depressing everyday work of leadership," that is, doing leadership in real life situations instead of just focusing on student samples or highly controlled environments. My study will explore this everyday work of leadership among MMs.

In this study, I will explore how MMs go about the sense-making work in their teams, and how they manage the dialogues with their top management, peer managers, subordinates, and other stakeholders in the sense-making process. What actions and behaviors exhibited by MMs are more effective in leading change? How do MMs manage the complicated relationships and demands during organizational change in the multinational setting under the Asia Pacific context?

Middle Managers: Who Are They? What Do They Do?

Middle managers play distinctive roles in the hierarchy of modern business organizations. Who are MMs? What do they do in the organizations? How have they been studied in leadership research? Floyd and Wooldridge (2000) differentiated the top management perspective and the middle management perspective towards economic performance. They thought that the top management makes decisions to deploy resources and capacities which create advantageous market positions, whereas the middle management master the knowledge and social influence processes at the middle level, which in turn make MMs play a key role in determining the organization’s ability to innovate and create new capacities. Now I will turn to the distinctive identities, roles, and functions of MMs in multinational settings.

For MNCs, the definitions of middle managers are more complicated because there are corporate executives who are one level below the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and handle various functional divisions such as finance, human resources, marketing, research and development (R&D), as well as strategic business units (SBUs) and manufacturing operations. At the regional and country levels, the regional leaders report to their corporate heads while they in turn direct their regional and national teams.

The political contests in and around MNCs (Clegg et al., 2018) and people management issues in organizational change post further challenges to MMs because people, by nature, resist change. Any disequilibrium could rock the boat and thus bring resistance. Kegan and Lahey (2009) rightly described the "immunity to change" in organizations when people have underlying agendas or hidden competing commitments to resist change. To assert their influence in their organizations, according to Block (1987), MMs required positive political skills to manage the top management's directives and expectations, to get things done, as well as to engage their staff during organizational change.

People elements are often not considered by most top leaders in planning and executing organizational changes; the top leaders focus on business vision, strategies, structures, profits, and the big issues, that is, they want results. It is MMs who are caught in the turmoil of people issues. Middle managers lack both the power to influence their corporate leaders in change management and skills in managing the negative impacts on their teams during rapid organizational changes, which could in turn bring about both vulnerability and an identity crisis to MMs (Bardon et al., 2017; Delmestri, 2006; Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020; Sims, 2003).

Based on my consulting experience with MNCs, I observed that their powerlessness in strategic decision-making of organizational changes could make them feel helpless in providing direction and coaching to their staff, when managing organizational change. Most of MMs could manage business and operation, but they do not know what to do with their people when their team members are anxious about their job security, career prospects, and other uncertainties concerns that readily emerge during an organizational change. It is not just about people management and team building; it is also about dealing with culture, organization, and cross-cultural leadership in Asia Pacific multinational settings. I will turn to this important contextual issue in the next section.

Culture, Organization, and Cross-Cultural Leadership in Asia Pacific Multinational Settings

For MMs of MNCs, they need to be aware of and to consider the meaning-making contexts of culture and organization. People do not create meanings as an isolated community of practice; they have been influenced by their professions, organizations, and the national cultures. Cultural and global leadership has significant value for MNCs currently moving towards regionalization and globalization in their business strategies and organization development. Corporations understand the importance of dealing with cultural factors in marketing of their products and services cultures, which are different from their home countries. They also realize that their global leaders and MMs need to acquire cultural intelligence and skills to lead and manage a diverse workforce who come from different cultural backgrounds (Elashmawi & Harris, 1993; Goldsmith et al., 2003; Jackson, 1995; Lewis, 1996).

Culture, as a shared system of meanings, dictates what groups of people pay attention to (Hoecklin, 1995). It guides how the world is perceived, how the self is experienced and how life itself is organized. Individuals of a group share patterns that enable them to see the same things in the same way and this holds them together. Each person carries within them learned ways of finding meaning in their experiences. Hofstede (1991) describes culture as the “collective programming of the mind” and explains that it lies between human nature on one side and individual personality on the other. Hofstede et al. (2010) further argue that each person carries around several “layers of cultural programming.” It starts with usually in the family when a child learns basic values: what is right and wrong, good and bad, logical and illogical, beautiful and ugly. Then, there are other layers of culture that are learned or “programmed” during education, through professional training and in organizational life.

When the global leaders attempt to lead changes in their organizations across borders and cultures, they must consider the practices and values of their workforce in general as well as the family and national cultures. Moreover, Wang et al. (2013) assert that both the global leaders, regional heads, and local managers should have constant and open dialogue to understand each other's viewpoints and feelings with sensitivity to the other parties' cultural differences.

Trompenaars (1993) argued that the basis of cultural differences depends on seven dimensions of culture: universalism versus particularism, individualism versus collectivism, neutral or emotional, specific versus diffuse, achievement versus ascription, attitudes to time, and attitudes to the environment. He further described different corporate cultures which are shaped by the cultural preferences of leaders and employees. The same MNC may have totally different corporate cultures in different countries or regions because of those cultural preferences of leaders and employees (Kowske & Anthony, 2007).

Geppert et al. (2006) pointed out that since the 1980s, the international business and management field has conducted numerous studies on the MNC as an organization. They argued that there are at least three different conceptual perspectives to understand the roles and activities of MNCs in transnational institution building. First, MNCs are operating in a global institutional environment which is increasingly shaped by global regulatory, political, economic, and social systems. Second, MNCs operate transnationally or globally and institutionalize management practices and structures at a corporate wide level. Third, MNCs' headquarters and subsidiaries as organizations as such are very much locally embedded in home and host countries, and thus the institutionalization of practices can be seen as strongly dependent on the specific cultural and organizational contexts of those local environments

(Geppert et al., 2006, pp. 1453–1456). It is not unusual, based on my observation in many Asia Pacific countries, that a foreign-investment MNC with a strong participative management culture might have a very autocratic local country manager, who adopts very centralized and tight control over strategic and operational decisions.

Pavett and Morris (1995) examined the relationship between management styles, participatory management systems, and productivity in similar plants of a US-based MNC located in five different countries. Each plant was under the direction of host nationals (Americans). Their findings demonstrated that the degree of participation differed widely between the Italian, Mexican, Spanish, American, and English plants. They concluded that the management systems in each of the plants reflected the expectations of the society and the local workforce. Moreover, management systems which are culturally congruent could produce equal levels of productivity, independent of whether the managers are empowered, or operate under centralized, autocratic control. Their findings are consistent with my consulting experience with some American and European MNCs operating in Asia Pacific region. Those expatriate executives bring with them their culturally specific management styles, and yet they could still build highly productive workforce and production sites in the local Asian countries.

Wang et al. (2013) noted about the discrepancies between global leadership expectation on the local Chinese managers at middle management level in terms of leadership competency requirements. They argued that MNC leadership models often represented in the top executives, who share similar western cultural backgrounds. Their study revealed that half of the key constructs of leadership used by the senior global leaders were not identified as important or commonly used by the Chinese managers.

Leadership and management studies on MNCs in Asia Pacific region, therefore, are necessary for future institutional building and leadership development. It will be beyond the scope of this study to look at the cultural factors of leadership practices and to identify the differences in leadership models or expectations between the global leaders and the local middle managers. The culture, organization, and cross-cultural leadership concepts could help me in observing and identifying those cultural elements and leadership expectations between the top management and the middle managers during my study. More specifically, in this study I will examine how MMs lead organizational changes in their MNC setting under the Asia Pacific context.

While “Asia Pacific” covers very wide geographical zones and cultural diversities spreading from Japan, Korea, China, Southeast Asia, Australia and New Zealand, all the way to India, Pakistan, and the Middle East, no single study could possibly cover the Asia Pacific context per se. I am also aware of the fact that a single site study in southern China could not infer the whole of China, not to mention the whole of Asia Pacific context. On the other hand, I am concerned about the common tendency of overgeneralization about China in terms of her political, economic, and social contexts. Putting the scope of my study under the Asia Pacific context is to allow the researcher and the readers of this paper to widen their perspectives about cultural contexts in leadership studies.

In this study I will only focus on the leadership practices of MMs during organizational change and see how they go about managing the complicated internal MNC environment dealing with their global leaders from western countries and working with the local employees in the Asian country. It is time to discuss the situational context of this study, that is, organizational change in the next section.

Organizational Change as the Situational Context of This Study

Leading organizational changes has been a hot topic among academia as well as leaders in governments and business corporations. Many authors have written about leadership in organizational change and steps in managing organizational changes (Bridges, 1995; Brill & Worth, 1997; Eales-White, 1994; Grantham et al., 2007; Gulati, 2009; Joyce, 1999; Katzenbach & the RCL Team, 1995; Kotter, 1995, 1996; Olesen, 1993). Those studies have focused on the top leaders and their strategies in leading organizational change, assuming that successful change outcomes depend on the leaders and their strategies alone (Banks et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2014). The process of leading change, and the interactions between the leaders and different levels within the organizations, as well as their relations with the external stakeholders and environment, are often ignored. Moreover, very little literature has addressed the leadership-as-practice of middle managers in organizational changes (Nielsen & Cleal, 2011). My study will address this by considering the leadership practices of middle managers and how organizational change is effectively executed or subtly resisted by them.

The Theoretical Origins of This Study

Three theoretical perspectives inform this study: leadership as a plural, rather than a singular process (*collective leadership*), *change management* theories, particularly those related to business organizational changes, and *leadership-as-practice* (LAP) theories of MMs, and related *empirical findings*. Firstly, the form of leadership (collective leadership) applicable to MMs in MNCs will be explored. Research has shown that leadership has individual, group, and organizational elements, and they intertwine and influence each other, and that their relationship is not linear (Chang et al., 2017; Fairhurst et al., 2020; Kearney & Gebert, 2009; Kim & Vandenberghe, 2018; Lehmann-Willenbrock et al., 2015; Ospina et al., 2020). Leadership, therefore, is more in the "plural" sense than in the "singular" (Denis et al., 2012) and it involves dynamic interactions with forces of the team, organization, and environment contexts.

Secondly, I will review the concepts and approaches of change management with specific reference to MMs of MNCs within the Asia Pacific context. Lewin's 3-stage (unfreezing, moving, and freezing) change management approach had influenced organizational change theories and practices from 1950s (Bucciarelli, 2015; Lewin, 1947;

Medley & Akan, 2008). Based on the stage model, Kotter (1991, 1996) has been the leading authority in change management studies in multinational corporation settings since 1990s. I will review the stage model critically and further explore the social learning theory (Goldstein, 1981) and learning organization concepts (Senge, 1990) to understand how learning could be a strategy or practice for leaders in leading organizational change.

Thirdly, I will examine the fundamental assumptions of the leadership-as-practice perspective on leadership and change. LAP focuses on the leaders' identities instead of qualities, the relationship and dialogue between the leaders and the followers, the process of change management as moments of continuous actions instead of a single action, and the organizational and cultural context at the team, and organization levels (Crevani et al., 2009; Ladkin, 2010; Ladkin & Spiller, 2013; Raelin, 2016). Finally, I will examine evidence from empirical research on LAP related to MMs in leading organizational change.

The Research Questions

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the practices of MMs during organizational changes in MNCs within the Asia Pacific context. To accomplish this goal, situational and multilevel factors need to be considered. Middle managers, the teams, the top management, the peer managers of other departments within the MNC organization, and external stakeholders in the changing business environment, are not static. Instead, they are constantly changing from the past to the present, and towards the future. The exploration will take a process perspective and from multiple organizational levels (Ladkin, 2010). Middle managers as individuals, the team dynamics, the interactions with the top management and peer managers of other departments, and the impacts of the business environment, are evolving and changing along with the process of organizational change. The LAP of MMs may be different in the process of change, and I will examine what those differences are and how the process of change affect LAP.

I will explore the following research questions of LAP of the middle managers during organizational change in MNCs within the Asia Pacific context:

- What are the interactions or dialogues between MMs and the top management, peer managers, and external stakeholders?
- What are the team interactions or dialogues between MMs and team members during organizational changes?
- What are the thoughts, plans, and actions that MMs have and take during organizational change?

Qualitative Research With Organizational Ethnography

To answer those research questions, I will need to employ a methodology that could allow me to observe and examine the day-to-day leadership practices of MMs in the process of organizational change; it must enable me to see what MMs *actually do* in their interactions or dialogues with their significant others in and out of their organization during *real time* and the meaning that they make of these processes. Organizational ethnography is considered as the appropriate methodology for my research.

Ethnography is the primary method of research in social/cultural anthropology (Case et al., 2014; Neyland, 2008). It is being applied in many disciplines today, including sociology, education, health, psychology, and recently management. Although ethnography is broad and diffuse, escaping precise simple definition (Atkinson et al., 2001), definitions of ethnography tend to share an emphasis on first-hand examination of a social or cultural setting through the researcher's immersion in that setting, repeated and often varied forms of data collection, and an inductive, systematic, and generative approach to inquiry (Atkinson et al., 2001; Miller et al., 2003). Case et al. (2014) define ethnography as "the study of the daily lives of a group of people, through the examination of their subjectivity and meaning making" (p. 61). The holistic method of organizational ethnography opens up particular lines of investigation to examine the commonalities among LAP research (Case et al., 2014; Kempster et al., 2016; Neyland, 2008; Yin, 2014). The holistic approach gives priority and necessity to examine actions, interactions, languages, dialogues, history, processes, and organizational contexts. In many ways it will enhance my understanding and the meaning of the "leadership moment" as theorized by Ladkin (2010).

Ethnography will enable me to observe and record what MMs actually do during the organizational changes in the actual work settings, such as town hall meetings, team meetings, shop floor discussions, cafeteria conversations, and if possible one-on-one conversations with their subordinates to manage change issues. In this ethnographic study, I will explore the organizational dynamics, interpersonal interactions between MMs and their significant others in the organization, operations and processes during organizational change, or anything that will enrich my understanding about leadership-as-practice of MMs during organizational change. While I maintain an open agenda in my organizational ethnography field study, I will focus on the thoughts, plans, and actions of MMs in relation to their change management and leadership during organizational change. To limit the scope of my study, I will not explore their self-identity in relation to organizational change (Harding et al., 2014) or their own sense-making of the organizational change. However, I will seek to understand their sense-making of their interactions, dialogues, and actions as MMs during organizational change.

Lastly, the types of organizational change that I wanted to study could include a downsizing exercise impacting the whole company, relocation of an operation from one location to another location, shutting down a plant or service center within 12 months, or an outsourcing exercise in which some employees move to the new service provider while others are redeployed or laid off. One common characteristic of those organizational changes is that the workforce is negatively impacted in one way or another because some staff need to leave the company eventually. Middle managers need to manage the change process although they were not involved in the strategic decision-making of the change. They need to deal with their own career development issues, their relationships with the team members (those who are leaving and those who are remaining), and their responsibilities as MMs to achieve performance and change outcomes.

To achieve the purpose of my study and to answer my research questions, specifically related to the leadership-as-practice of MMs during organizational change, I will need to identify a potential research site where the top management, MMs, and team members feel comfortable to allow me to spend an extensive period of time with them as a researcher and observer during their daily work and change management process. I will discuss more about the choice of site for the study and the methodology in Chapter III.

Self-Reflexivity and Positionality

Cunliffe (2003) reminds researchers to be mindful of the processes of self-reflexivity, which involves reflecting how their research projects are shaped by their personal interests, values, experiences, as well as business and political commitments. According to James and Vinnicombe (2002) and Haynes (2012), researchers have posed self-reflexivity questions relating to the chosen research topic and personal motivations and interests for studying it, as:

- Why am I undertaking the research topic I have selected? What are my personal motivations? What are my personal, business, and political reasons for undertaking my research? What personal experiences do I have related to my research topic? What (or who) has prompted the research and why? How is the research shaped by my own personal interest and, if applicable, the interests of a sponsoring organization or the research site? Has this influenced the framing of the research question and the context in which the research is conducted? (James & Vinnicombe, 2002, p. 97)

- How am I connected to the research, theoretically, experientially, emotionally? And what effect will this have on my framework and method? (Haynes, 2012, p. 78)

Self-reflexivity, therefore, presents the positionality of the researcher reflexively, honestly, and professionally (Corlett & Mavin, 2018). Positionality presupposes that, in undertaking research projects and writing research accounts, the researchers are disclosing something about themselves and explaining why they have undertaken the research as they have proposed to do with particular subjects and objectives in mind (Holmes, 2020; Mason-Bish, 2019). Organization ethnography requires such self-reflexivity and positionality even more than other qualitative research because of its intensity and intimacy with the participants during the study and possible conflict of interest between the research and the organization under study (Manning, 2018).

My reading on LAP (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Carroll et al., 2008; Ladkin, 2010; Ladkin & Spiller, 2013; Raelin, 2016; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012) last year, and the lecture by Dr. Donna Ladkin on LAP at Antioch University in November 2019, had intrigued me profoundly because I have believed in the concepts of phenomenology, hermeneutics, post-positivist approach in epistemology, social construction of reality (Berger & Luckman, 1966), and change as a process since my social work education back in 1987. My theological education in 1995–1999 deepened my understanding in philosophy, particularly existential philosophy and process theology. The LAP approach in leadership study challenges the established paradigm of leadership as competency and moment of action such as visioning and inspiring. That was almost like an awakening experience to me. Whatever I had learned about transformational leadership became different and I knew that I needed to learn more about LAP and to ground my study on the theories and applications of LAP instead of the traditional leadership theories.

Based on the literature review on the role of MMs, change management theories, LAP theories, and empirical studies of LAP of MMs, I found that there is very little research conducted among MMs of MNCs undergoing organizational changes. My study may contribute to leadership-as-practice theory of MMs, leadership development, team development, as well as change management effectiveness among MNCs under the Asia Pacific context.

This dissertation will be presented in six chapters. Chapter I is the introduction of the study. Chapter II will cover the literature review of the theoretical origins and empirical studies in relation to the study. In Chapter III, I will explain the methodology, research design, and methods with the particular research site in mind. Then, I will tell the story of my immersion into the organization as an ethnographer in the six-month data collection process in Chapter IV. I will analyze the data in Chapter V based on the change, process, and practice model. I will firstly explain the changes that the organization was going through, the processes that the MMs were involved in as results of those organizational changes, and, finally, the leadership practices that the MMs applied and demonstrated during my ethnographic study. In Chapter VI, I will seek to integrate the research findings with the theoretical origins and empirical studies reviewed and to discuss the contributions and significance of the findings as well as limitations of my study and recommendations for further study at the end.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents the literature review of the theoretical framework of the exploratory study on leadership-as-practice of middle managers (MMs) of multinational corporations (MNCs) during organizational changes under the Asia Pacific context. I will focus on three major sources of theories to construct the theoretical framework of my study: (a) middle managers and collective leadership, (b) change management theories and processes, and (c) leadership-as-practice literature in relation to MMs in leading change. In the first section, I will first review the collective leadership concepts and how they are related to the roles and functions of MMs in modern organizations. Secondly, I will review the change management literature particularly Kotter's eight-step leading change process and then I will apply Kotter's leading change process to MMs to explore the challenges and actions that they are required to do during the visioning, communicating, and implementing stages of Kotter's leading change process. I will further draw from social learning theories and learning organization concepts to supplement the step-model and to point out the importance of social interactions and mental models (cultures) in change management. Thirdly, I will examine the leadership-as-practice literature to understand the concepts of adaptive leadership, boundary span leadership, and the leadership moment considering leadership in process and time. Finally, I will look for empirical evidence for leadership-as-practice of MMs in leading organizational change. The focus of the literature review is to further explore LAP of MMs by understanding what leaders and teams actually do in sense-making, and in their team interactions and dialogues with their significant others (subordinates, top management, peer managers, and stakeholders in the business environment) during organizational changes.

Middle Managers and Collective Leadership

The purpose of this study is to understand how change happens in MNCs and what role the practices of MMs have in those processes—what they actually do to make change happen? Underpinning this phenomenon is an assumption that change does not happen just through one person and that others need to be involved both in the strategic planning and execution processes of any organizational change across the globe or regions. The literature characterizes this as collective leadership, which I will explore more in the following paragraphs.

When MNCs seek to launch organizational changes, it takes more than just one leader (usually the CEO) to drive the change; naturally, the CEO requires the support and collective leadership from the top executive team as well as the middle managers (Fairhurst et al., 2020; Ospina et al., 2020). Kotter (1996) talks about the "isolated CEO" when the top leader fails to build a guiding coalition in leading change (p. 52).

Denis et al. (2012) discussed the combined influence of multiple leaders in specific organizational situations. More specifically, they identified four main streams of "leadership in the plural": (a) sharing leadership in teams, (b) pooling leadership at the top of organizations, (c) spreading leadership across boundaries over time, and (d) producing leadership through interaction (p. 5). In my past 28 years of experience working with MNCs in Asia Pacific, I have seen MNCs apply leadership in the plural for succession planning, contingency management, and leadership development purposes. At the middle management level, business organizations might assign their MMs in cross functional teams, task forces, and project teams to drive and implement changes with appropriate empowerment and decision-making processes. Middle managers in turn could form more subgroups to implement those change initiatives driven by the corporate offices.

Ospina et al. (2020) argued that collective leadership could be further defined based on "locus of leadership" and "view of collectivity" (p. 443). The locus of leadership idea refers to where people look for leadership. Does leadership exist in the group? Or does it exist in the system? View of collectivity, on the other hand, denotes the ontological perspective of the nature of leadership. Transformational leadership assumes leadership type whereas leadership-as-practice, according to Ospina et al. (2020), falls under leadership lens which is based on constructionist ontology (p. 443). The leadership lens concept is similar to the leadership moment concept (Ladkin, 2010). That explains how I define collective leadership in my study, that is, collective leadership residing in the group (interaction and dialogue) and collective leadership as the lens (socially constructed by the leader and the team members).

More specifically, in my study, I will examine how collective leadership is showed in the group during organizational change. What are the roles and functions of MMs? How do they interact and dialogue with the team members to form this collective leadership among the team? With this collective leadership perspective, I will look at the roles and functions of MMs in MNC settings.

Definitions, Roles, and Functions of MMs in Multinational Settings

Wooldridge et al. (2008) pointed out that the theoretical definition of middle management remains somewhat ambiguous. They further defined middle managers as those who are below top managers and above first-level supervision in the hierarchy, and more importantly, that they have access to top management coupled with their knowledge of operations (Wooldridge et al., 2008, p. 1192). In the past 20 years, more research on middle management and strategic process in corporations has been done (Collier et al., 2004; Floyd et al., 2011; Floyd & Lane, 2000; Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000, 2017; Haneberg, 2005; Kownatzki et al., 2013; Wooldridge et al., 2008). The changing nature of managerial work, as a result of corporate organizational changes, has impacted on the jobs of MMs as well as their careers (Foster et al., 2019). There is nonetheless very little literature written about the middle managers, particularly their roles and functions in the organizations, not to mention the actual leadership-as-practice at the middle levels (Hill, 2019; Tinline & Cooper, 2016).

Hill (2019) described the roles of the MM under the conceptual model of agenda setting (financial, business, and organizational) and network building (subordinates, superiors, peers, and external stakeholders; p. 17). More specifically, she pointed out that the MM needs to play the roles of *boss* (the person in charge of the unit/operation), *sales leader* (the person who drives the business to generate sales and profits), *supervisor/team leader* (the person who is responsible for talent management, people development, and performance management), *administrator* (the person who handles administrative and financial matters), and *politician* (the person who builds and manages relationships with subordinates, superiors, peers, and external stakeholders). Middle managers constantly need to juggle with those roles and to manage conflicts in expectations of various parties. Those challenges could become more acute when the organization is facing a VUCA business environment and is going through massive organizational changes.

Tinline and Cooper (2016) described the MM's life in the middle in perspectives of life satisfaction, stress, and career development. The MM, being in the middle of the organizational hierarchy, has certain power and influence with subordinates, superiors, peers, and external stakeholders. To effectively manage in the middle, Tinline and Cooper suggested that the MM could work out life management goals, leading and influencing goals, work pressure management goals, and career development goals (p. 16).

Lee (1994) pointed out that the change leader role and the operation manager role for MMs could be very confusing in driving organizational change. On the one hand, MMs, as *operation managers*, are required to ensure efficiency and stability in production and service operations, to focus on objectives and internal environments, and to minimize failure and risk. On the other hand, they are expected to play the role of *change leaders*, in fostering change, challenging established processes, enhancing effectiveness, encouraging questioning, modeling and promoting risk taking, creating and communicating shared visions, and scanning external environments to anticipate change.

Middle managers are often described as transactional leaders who maintain the operations and execute the top management's decisions (Burns, 1978, p. 455). Collier et al. (2004) pointed out that MMs' involvement strengthens shared vision, increases rationality, and has the potential to improve adaptiveness in strategy making. Recent research has shown that staff engagement and change effectiveness in business organizations have much to do with the leadership qualities and styles of MMs as well as team interaction and identification (Godkin, 2014; Spaten & Flensborg, 2013). Middle managers must balance and maintain the right priority in their leadership and management roles. Too much leaning on the manager role makes MMs inflexible and ineffective in driving change. Too much focusing on leader role makes the day-to-day operations highly versatile and ultimately fall apart when the team and the systems are not ready for the change. Middle managers need to balance between the two roles of manager and leader in view of the ever-changing business environment and organizational needs (Lee, 1994).

The business operations and transformation processes are intertwined. The leaders must focus on their business goals ahead and change management results, while they strive to balance the forces of the two sides. In my study, I will look at how MMs maintain such a balance, or whether they are largely unable to achieve this goal. In the next section, I turn to change management theories and approaches to explore the leadership-as-practice for MMs in leading organizational changes. While Kotter's eight-step change management approach has been very popular among MNCs and practical for top management in articulating their visions, communicating change, and implementing change, I will look at what change management literature has critiqued about the step model and Kotter's leading change process (1996), and more particularly how MMs could apply the 8-step in leading organizational change and the challenges that they might face in the process.

Change Management Theories and Approaches

Change management literature has focused mostly on the top leaders and their strategies in leading organizational changes, assuming that successful change outcomes depend on the leaders and their strategies alone (Banks et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2014). The processes and the contexts of leading change among different levels within the organizations, as well as their relations with the internal stakeholders and the external environment, require further research (Cameron & Green, 2015; Kanter et al., 1992). Moreover, very little literature has addressed the practice of MMs in organizational changes (Nielsen & Cleal, 2011).

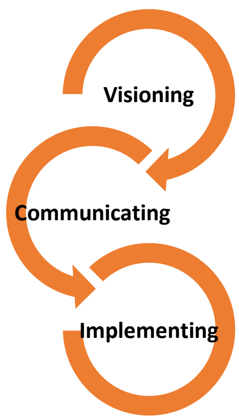
Lewin (1947) argued that organizational changes take three necessary steps:

1. *Unfreezing* the organization, getting rid of the attitude that individuals have against the change, creating a vision of a better future by delivering information, and establishing the urgency to change.
2. *Moving* through the change process by getting the people engaged and creating equilibrium among the driving and restraining forces inside the organization (Bucciarelli, 2015).
3. *Freezing*: creating and keeping new conditions and new ways of doing things.

Following Lewin's step model, Kotter (1991) further explored into the important question of why many corporations had failed in their efforts of business transformation. Later he outlined the eight-stage process in leading organizational transformation which basically consisted of the opposite of those eight fundamental errors in leading business transformation (Kotter, 1996). Kotter's 8-step leading change model has been widely applied in business transformation and organizational changes in the past two decades (Rajan & Ganesan, 2017). It is very much a top-down approach, focusing on the roles and strategies of the top leaders in driving transformations. Kotter (2001), in his discussion of leadership, thought that one of the first jobs of managers is to create a sense of urgency for change by getting people to comprehend a vision of an alternative future (p. 90). The next challenge is to engage the people to believe the message and to execute the change. In MNCs, usually it is the top leader (CEO) who develops the vision for the company based on his/her best judgment of the business environment and analysis of the core competencies of the organization. Then, the top leader holds a town hall meeting to communicate to the executives and middle managers about her new visions (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1

Leading Change Process



Then, MMs are expected to communicate and implement the change in their departments and teams, based on the directives and objectives defined by the top management. The critical questions are whether MMs could follow the 8-steps which were developed for top management in the first place in leading organizational change, and more importantly whether the step model presents the actual process and practice of MMs in leading organizational change.

Organizational change is a very fluid process and there are different dynamics or forces that affect both the environment, as well as the organization undergoing change, change management is not solely following a stage/step approach (Bucciarelli, 2015). The Kotter leading change model is less concerned with individual behaviors, except when it comes to being motivated about the change and feeling the urgency of the change. When it comes to detail, Kotter's theory does not give people any frameworks or processes about how to assess the need for change and people's readiness for change. The Kotter model is very much a top-down leadership and change approach, without considering the roles of the middle management as well as the internal and external forces of the stakeholders. In addition, the actual process of change may not follow the sequence of Kotter's 8-step model; some steps might be missing and sometimes some steps might repeat themselves (Bucciarelli, 2015). Change is more of a spiral, complicated, dynamic, and sometimes chaotic process; it is definitely not as linear as Kotter's model describes.

Lewin (1951) rightly pointed out the simple and useful model of force field analysis, giving consideration of the driving forces and restraining forces in organizational change, instead of just pushing through the steps of leading change. Nonetheless, Lewin did not address the practices of the leaders on how to survive in the power dynamics in organizations, and how to influence those driving and restraining forces during organizational change.

Lewin's change model, while simple, can be too simple, leaving more blanks that change managers must fill in on their own, rather than Kotter's 8-step change model (Bucciarelli, 2015).

Change management literature shows that the changing business environment of MNCs requires MMs to put their top priority in driving immediate change goals and in mobilizing their members and other agents to achieve those change outcomes. They need to manage the complex organization during organizational changes while they seek to maintain the morale of their teams, and to mobilize them through visioning, communicating, and implementing practice (Cameron & Green, 2015). Effective communication could help employees manage transition and move on to the new future. In the following section, I will examine the challenges and practices of MMs in carrying out the visioning, communicating, and implementing work in organizational changes.

Visioning Change

In visioning, MMs must be able to answer the question: Why change (Kotter, 2001)? The meaning of change and the sense-making processes at the middle level and lower-level of an organization could be different from the top management. The top leaders create the vision for change as well as inspire and motivate the whole company or organization to recognize the need for change and the vision for the business transformation (Kempster et al., 2011). Top leaders often communicate their key messages of organizational changes to MMs and expect MMs to further cascade the change messages down to the lower levels (Cameron & Green, 2015; Kanter et al., 1992). Middle managers do not have the authority and power to initiate or to disagree about those corporate visions and organizational changes; they are expected to execute those changes based on the top management's decisions and strategies (Tasler, 2016). Middle managers, being in the middle levels of the organization, play important roles in the sense-making process (Cameron & Green, 2015). They need to make the vision for change relevant and meaningful to their team members instead of just repeating what the top management has already said about the grand vision. That is a dialectic sense-making process which involves dealing with resistance to change among the team and facilitating open discussion among the community of practice about the needs for change, the strategies of change, and even the timing of change, to gain the buy-in of the staff (Bendixen et al., 2017). In my study, I will examine how MMs make the vision for change relevant and meaningful to their team members. Based on my past consulting and training experience with MMs, they tend to jump into the implementation process without doing the visioning and communicating steps properly or effectively.

According to Raelin (2016), an organization's vision should preferably arise out of the group as it accomplishes its work. The leader does not walk away to create the vision; the vision is often already present. It just needs articulation in the form of meaning making and usually that is done through dialogues among the executives and the members.

Meaning making can come from anyone in the group, though usually the meaning is voiced by someone who listens well, is close to the rhythm of the team, and is expressive (Raelin, 2016, p. 65). Such a bottom-up visioning process might not be feasible for MNCs when most of the strategic decisions are made in the board rooms instead of the shop floors. For MMs, they could involve their teams in communicating change and implementing change with their feedback and participation in decision making at the department or team levels.

Communicating Change

In the communication stage of the Kotter's leading change process, MMs often lack sufficient information about organizational changes, and yet they are expected to just do it in a VUCA business environment. After all, they know very well that their top management only look at the big pictures and they care less about what is happening at the ground levels (Tinline & Cooper, 2016). They have realized that the top leaders might not have the interest, time, or energy to be concerned about their divisions, departments, or teams, when they are very much preoccupied with fighting the global competition and other big issues (Cameron & Green, 2015). Some MMs who have worked for a company for several years might be used to the old patterns or ways of doing things, and they may feel helpless and powerless in leading organizational changes that they themselves do not see as urgent (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). Other MMs who may be receptive and even supportive of the change initiatives, may feel that they do not have clear directions from their top leaders. In communicating the organizational change to their staff, MMs need to gain the buy-in for change from their staff, and direct them in executing those changes, despite the fact that they do not support the change or do not have the necessary information for implementing change at hand.

Middle managers understand the leadership challenges when they do not have the direct authority to make decisions about organizational changes; there are conflicting needs among different stakeholders, and MMs need to manage those conflicts while they continue to communicate and implement changes. Whenever there is organizational change, the heat is always there; either it is from the top or from the bottom or from outside the organization. Middle managers need to play the role of facilitator of dialogue (Raelin, 2012b, p. 818) to involve the stakeholders in identifying the problems and finding the solutions to those challenges at their department or team levels, by being with the team and working alongside with them while seeking to listen, ask, reframe, bridge, and coach them under the grand scheme of organizational change (Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2011; Raelin, 2012a).

When MMs communicate organizational change, they must address the *benefits of change* to the staff, to the team, and finally to the company and customers in contract, to the top management message about the benefit of change to the company and to the customers only (Kotter, 1996, 2001). The individual members must align their goals to the team goals and to the company's goals to foster the adaptive leadership moment in the team and in the complex environment (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Middle managers may let the team know their personal goals and emotions about the change in positive ways. Middle managers also need to model risk taking by leaving the comfort zones (the old patterns) and learning new knowledge and skills to adapt to changes. In this study, I will observe how MMs go about communicating the vision of change with their teams and involve their team members in participating in decision-making process during change implementation.

Implementing Change

The focus of MMs at the implementing stage is to make sure that the change plan works and the leaders, together with the teams, make necessary adaptation to the rapidly changing environment as they move on. The aim is to achieve the change results and work together with their teams and other stakeholders to achieve those results (Schaffer & Thomson, 1991). Middle managers who supposedly know the day-to-day operations of their business, could acquire an entrepreneurial spirit in taking the ownership of change, and implementing the strategies and the new ways of doing things (Collins & Lazier, 1992).

Ownership and Entrepreneurship. Schaffer and Thomson (1991) pointed out that successful change programs begin with results. Middle managers need to take the entrepreneurship or ownership of the change programs to drive and deliver the desired change results; it is not just about going through the motions of change, but about achieving the change outcomes.

Tonsberg and Henderson (2016) discussed the praxeological evolutionary conception of leader action and follower response, pointing out the interaction between leader entrepreneurship and follower entrepreneurship. Using these ideas, MMs encourage individual members to make their own choice for their careers, share their knowledge and information with their team members and other stakeholders, learn and be creative in solving new problems and challenges encountered every day (Cameron & Green, 2015). Their self-directed career orientation and adaptability to change could enable them to connect and interact with their significant others in the organization and external stakeholders in the business environment in much positive ways (Dopson & Steward, 1990; Katzenbach & the RCL Team, 1995). Instead of waiting passively, and sometimes negatively, for instructions from the top or from MMs, their team members could address to change issues directly and responsively, based on their knowledge and judgment in the frontlines.

Ownership of the change process and entrepreneurship among all members could be the most important critical factors of success for any organizational change. In this study, I will observe and interview MMs to see how they engage their team members to take more ownership about the organizational change, and how they coach their team members to manage their career development in uncertainties.

Building a New Team Culture. Additionally, while MMs are trying to inspire and motivate their team members to accept and support the change initiatives, they are expected to stabilize the morale and maintain the operational efficiency in their departments. The eighth and the final step of Kotter's business transformation process is building a new culture (Kotter, 1996). Heifetz et al. (2009) also advocated that building an adaptive culture is the final step of mobilizing the system process. Other change management literature also points out the importance of building a new team culture and positive change behaviors as a community of practice (Bendixen et al., 2017; Hofstede, 1991; Lee, 1994; Pritchett & Pound, 1988, 1992, 1993; Wenger, 1998). Crevani and Endrissat (2016) pointed out that during organizational change, on the people side, people are in relation based on their roles and functions in the team. On the actions side, leaders and members interact with actions acted upon the team, the organization, or the environment, to create positive or negative change outcomes.

If building a new team culture and leading organizational change is about how people behave and interact with each other and with other stakeholders in new ways brought about by the change, social learning theories could be useful for understanding the leadership and change management process among the teams and within the learning organization (Goldstein, 1981; Senge, 1990). "Learning was described as a process that involves someone mastering something for some purpose within a particular situation. What makes it a social learning event are its interactional and social characteristics and purposes" (Goldstein, 1981, p. 251). It may not be overexaggerating to say that change management is learning management. How organizations, teams, and individuals adapt to change is through learning.

Senge (1990) advocates for the need to build the “fifth discipline” in the learning organization by changing the mental models (cultures if you want), that is, how people think and how people interact.

The leadership-as-practice of MMs for change management, therefore, is about dealing with the complicated people issues and mobilizing actions among the individuals and the teams (Crevani & Endrissat, 2016, p. 36). In my study, I will observe how MMs deal with the people issues and mobilize actions among the individuals and the teams during organizational change. With the learning perspective in mind, I will continue to explore leadership-as-practice of MMs in leading change through learning and continuous improvement. Now I will turn to leadership-as-practice theories and empirical studies to look for insights and evidence of the actual leadership practices of MMs during organizational changes.

Leadership-as-Practice Theories and Empirical Studies of MMs

In the following sections, I will explore how adaptive leadership theory and boundary spanning leadership theory describe the practice of leaders and MMs in leading organizational changes. Moreover, I will explain the leadership moment concept to bring in the perspective of process and time in understanding leadership as practice. Finally, I will analyze the empirical findings from LAP studies to identify the key roles and practices of MMs.

There are complementary theories of leadership which clarify the challenges faced by MMs. Adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002) is about how leaders encourage people to adapt by rightfully identifying the problem and finding the adaptive solutions to those problems, challenges, and changes (Northouse, 2016). Boundary spanning leadership (Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2011), based on the direction, alignment, and commitment (DAC) concepts developed by the Center for Creative Leadership, provides leaders with an understanding of the essential practices necessary to lead in this changing complex business environment. Ladkin (2010) applied process philosophy developed by Whitehead (1978) and Bergson (1983) to leading change. Process philosophy argues that change, rather than stability, is the nature of reality (Ladkin, 2010, p. 139). In the process of leading change leadership, according to Ladkin, is seen a *moment*, which is realized “in the interpenetration of a person taking up the ‘leader’ role, those who would follow him or her, the purpose towards which their action is directed, and the particular context in which they are located” (p. 138). I will review the literature of those three major LAP theories and empirical studies in detail applying them to my study of MMs in leading organizational change.

The Adaptive Leadership Work of MMs in Leading Change

Adaptive leadership theory puts more importance on the process of mobilizing *adaptive work* among the stakeholders than on the leadership qualities or behaviors of the authority figures or the frontline managers without authority. The role of the adaptive MM is not so much in giving direction or making decisions for the organization or for problem solving of situations in the midst of conflicting values and goals among the stakeholders. Instead, the adaptive MM allows and facilitates actively the ownership of the problem identification and solution by providing a *holding environment* whereby the stakeholders may interact and challenge each other to negotiate a final adaptive and acceptable outcome. Middle managers must trust the stakeholders and take risks in restraining their authority and power to make decisions and to solve problems on behalf of or for the sake of the stakeholders; the adaptive work must be carried out through the process and active participation of the stakeholders.

Heifetz (1994) recognized that leadership is built on the roots of authority and the application of power in the mobilization and interaction with the stakeholders. Middle managers must maintain that delicate balance of when and how to apply their power, as if they are walking on the "razor's edge." They do not want to take away the opportunity of adaptive work among the stakeholders to find the long term and effective solutions to challenges and problems instead of making resolutions with their authority and power as if the challenges are merely technical problems which require expert solutions. Furthermore, the frontline MMs need to take the risk of creative deviance because they are more knowledgeable about the people and the situation in the frontline, not those on the top.

Heifetz and Linsky (2002) further pointed out the importance of "staying alive through the dangers of leading," particularly when MMs are caught in the middle. They described the proper response of MMs as well as the need to dwell on one's body and soul in the process of leading. According to them, the adaptive MMs should do the following:

1. Get on the *balcony* to see the big picture and to sense the political and emotional dynamics on the top as well as in the frontline. Middle managers must not be so caught up in the processes, interactions and sometimes conflicts in the frontline (or *ballroom*) that they lose sight of the overall scheme of things.
2. Think politically such that MMs do not step on the *mines* in the bureaucratic environment and jeopardize the primary interests of those who are on the top. Middle managers must not be presumptuous about the unconditional support from the top management when they deal with a problem; the top management could change their minds when the *winds* (public pressure or political climate at the top) are strong and against their underlying agenda.
3. Orchestrate the conflict such that the interactions between different parties who have different agendas and interests could see the real problems and generate solutions that are acceptable to them, not from someone in authority.
4. Instead of solving the technical work (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002, p. 14) as typical technocrats could do, the adaptive leaders give the work back to the stakeholders so

that they could identify the problem, generate the solutions to the problems, and execute those solutions whole heartedly. Trusting the stakeholders to solve the problems themselves involves courage and risk taking on the part of the adaptive MMs, because the final outcomes might not be what MMs want to see. When MMs have the authority and power to solve the technical problems, people on the top or in the frontline could blame MMs for not making decisions or finding solutions.

5. Hold steady, particularly when things are getting tough and conflicts are generating heat from the top, the bottom, and all around MMs. In the midst of challenges and conflicts, MMs must anchor themselves on their values and their *sacred heart*, that is, their passion and mission (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002, p. 227). Middle managers should find confidants whom they could talk to and reflect upon their leadership and adaptive work; the leaders could not do it by themselves.
6. Build an adaptive culture as part of mobilizing the system process (Heifetz et al., 2009). More specifically all members, not just MMs, should make it a norm to *name the elephants*, share responsibility for the organization, encourage independent judgment, develop leadership capacity at all levels, and institutionalize reflection and continuous learning.

Based on my observation of MNCs in Asia Pacific, such adaptive culture is not encouraged and most of MMs as well as their subordinates tend to be submissive and quiet about their opinions. Naming the elephants could mean career suicide when it is against the will of the leaders among many Asian cultures, where autocratic leadership styles are commonly practiced. On the other hand, many European and American MNCs try to foster adaptive leadership and culture within their organizations. In my study, I will examine whether the top management of the MNC promotes such leadership practices, and more importantly whether MMs actually apply adaptive leadership and create adaptive culture in their teams.

Adaptive leadership theory has aptly pointed out the importance of the political and organizational context, the process as well as the involvement of all stakeholders in the problem identification and solution. The adaptive MMs, unlike the transformational leaders who give direction and strategy, and the rest of the organization follows, refrain from asserting their authority and power to solve the problems as technical work when they are not technical in nature. Middle managers must be clear about their purpose and must allow diverse forces to interact and to create the solution discovered, accepted, and executed by all the stakeholders, not by the leaders. It is no longer MMs solely driving the change, but the stakeholders involved in the problem or challenge.

Middle managers, according to Heifetz and Linsky (2002), should bear in mind the notion of adaptive work when they are driving change initiatives among their departments or teams (p. 14). They are not the only drivers of change, but the whole team of stakeholders are. The whole adaptive work requires political skills, conflict management skills, and influencing skills on the part of the adaptive MMs. While time is critical, they must maintain the holding environment by building an adaptive team culture among their working teams as well as fostering a common commitment towards problem solving among all the stakeholders. Without that process of adaptive work among the stakeholders, the desired change outcomes will never come forth. Middle managers also need to convince the top management to give them time and space to find and execute the adaptive solution, instead of just executing the top-down decisions (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). In my study, I will observe the interactions between the top management and MMs in relation to executing the organizational change. More specifically, I will see how MMs convince the top management to let them do adaptive work with the stakeholders.

Each level of the organization may initiate or trigger adaptive leadership within the whole organization. Middle managers are often in a position to engage in adaptive leadership behaviors because of their access to resources and their direct involvement in the boundary conditions for the systems' production level (Uhl-Bien et al., 2008). They need to manage the entanglement between adaptive and administrative structures, the administrative-adaptive interface, and the innovation-to-organization interface (Uhl-Bien et al., 2008, pp. 210–213). They are truly the middle persons between all those structures and people in the organizations.

To illustrate the adaptive work, let me use a real story of a friend, who was a government official in charge of a transportation improvement project. He worked under the government's policy and regulation, but at the same time he needed to be adaptive in communicating with the stakeholders, particularly the local residents of the neighborhood in which the road construction work was carried out. The official went to visit the residents and heard their concerns about noise and removal of the trees and gardens next to their houses. The government's policy and regulation stipulated that the official was not allowed to reclaim lands when he could use government land to do the road construction work. The official went back and forth with the concerned departments and convinced them that the proposed solution, which involved reclaiming of land from nearby landowners, and the cost could be cheaper than the original construction work. He appealed to another policy which allowed him to keep the lowest cost in achieving administrative objective with his adaptive leadership.

Adaptive leadership requires immersion in the process and the dynamics of the interactions among MMs, the teams, the top management, the other departments in the organization, and the stakeholders in the business environment concerned. Because MMs cannot predict or control the outcome of the problem solving and decision-making processes; they need to be adaptive and walk on the razor's edge, in maintaining the delicate balance among the different interested parties. Adaptive leadership theory could, at best, point out the general principles in facilitating adaptive work and in building an organizational climate where adaptive work could be carried out; it does not tell how MMs could actually do the adaptive work, and how to create the holding environment within the organization and with the external stakeholders.

Moreover, adaptive leadership and the role of MMs in those structures and interfaces which Heifetz and Uhl-Bien theorized, have not been studied empirically. To a certain extent, I hope that my study will contribute empirical evidence to describe the actual practice of MMs and their roles in those structures and interfaces with a multilevel approach of research design.

The Boundary Spanning Leadership Practices of MMs in Leading Change

Drath et al. (2008) assert that there are three elements to make leadership happen: (a) *direction*: agreement on what the collective is trying to achieve; (b) *alignment*: effective coordination and integration of the different aspects of the work so that it fits together in service of the shared direction; and (c) *commitment*: people who are making the success of the collective (not just their individual success or the success of the leader) a personal priority. McCauley (2014) reminds us that while the top management may have the direction, alignment, and commitment (DAC) in leading organizational change, the organization in general may not have come to that moment of DAC or leadership; it may only be happening at the top but not in the middle or at the bottom of the organization. To make leadership happen, the top management needs to firstly gain the support and collaboration of MMs. Then, however difficult it may be, the lower levels of people in the organization must be involved to form the community of practice for leading organizational change. When the whole organization can see the reality of the external business environment and the need for organizational challenges, and mobilize the appropriate responses to change, leadership is truly happening (Tichy, 1997). The organization is ready to accomplish the change or leadership outcomes.

Boundary spanning leadership, according to Ernst and Chrobot-Mason (2011), is the capability to create DAC across group boundaries in view of the common vision or goal of the organization. It begins with a new way of looking at and working with vertical, horizontal, stakeholder, demographic, and geographic boundaries within the multinational corporation organization structure. The "nexus effect," that is, desirable business results that the organization could accomplish as a whole instead of through their parts or groups, can be accomplished by consistent leadership practices among the managers and the members of the teams (Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2011, p. 238). The six practices to create the nexus effect include: *buffering* (creating safety), *reflecting* (fostering respect), *connectin*g (building trust), *mobilizing* (developing community), *weaving* (advancing interdependence), and *transforming* (enabling reinvention; Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2011, p. 13). In my study, I will look into the actual leadership practices of MMs to see whether they have applied those six practices of boundary spanning leadership in leading change, or indeed whether others emerge from the particular organizational and cultural contexts.

Boundary spanning leadership theory provides an empirically based practice model of leading organizational change which is useful for MMs to manage conflicting demands from different stakeholders. While they are dealing with highly complex and political relationships, the six practices could help create the nexus effect which could be brought about not only by the efforts of the leaders, but by the involvement of all the varying groups within the organization. It focuses on the continuous actions that the leaders and the teams need to undertake under the diverse tensions and conflicts that arise during organizational changes.

I will draw on the concepts and practice of adaptive leadership theory (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002) to understand what MMs need to do in managing change or adaptive work, and boundary spanning leadership theory (Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2011) to see how MMs deal with the complicated relationships and conflicting demands in complex organizations and the business environment of MNCs. In the next section, I will explore how leadership as practice could be understood as a response to the process and time, that is, more specifically, how leadership is emerged in the leadership moment (Ladkin, 2010).

The Leadership Moment

The leadership moment emerges when the team or the community of practice has come to a common understanding of the meaning of reality and the purpose of the organization; they interact and work together with commitment and collaboration towards that shared direction (Ladkin, 2010). More specifically, applying the leadership moment concept to organizational change situation, it is like the consensus or awareness or consciousness when leadership is happening in the team during the organizational change. It could happen when a MM is doing the visioning with the team to help them understand the vision for change. One may also find such a leadership moment when a MM is motivating them to move on with the company or when a MM is communicating with the team about some challenges encountered in the change process.

A fictional account illustrates this point about leadership moment. In the movie *Saving Private Ryan,* the Captain, acted by Hanks, was commissioned to go into the enemy territory to look for Private Ryan because the State Department decided that he should be sent home so that his mother would not have four sons die in the same battle. The Captain, as a middle manager, did not inspire the team with a vision and mission; he did not give any speech or orders to motivate/force the team to follow him. The Captain tried to manage the conflicts and to make sense of the mission while they continued to adapt to the challenges that were presented to them. The individual soldiers had their own goals and values, and they obviously could not agree with the mission. The administrative leadership of the US Army had given the order and they could not refuse or run away.

The role of the MM was to foster the cohesion of the team and to direct them to the immediate goals in front of them (small changes) while they continued to carry out their mission. At one critical moment, the Captain finally shared about his *vision* for the mission. He told his team that he was a primary school teacher before he joined the army and that he just wanted to go home to see his wife after the war. The team listened to their Captain, and they decided to follow him until the end. They were learning and working together to fight the battles. They were fighting for each other to survive and win the battles. The whole team adapted and moved to carry out their ultimate mission—to win the war for their people. Through all of these interactions, the leadership moment emerged.

Process perspectives suggest that the organization is constituted by the interaction processes among its members and that this interaction is fluid, ongoing, evolving, creative and without any definite endpoint (Langley & Tsoukas, 2010; Langley et al., 2013; Tourish, 2014). The implications for practice, according to Tourish (2014), include the following:

- The context in which leadership is practiced is critical.
- Leadership is inherently complex, contradictory, iterative, adaptive, and contested. There is no one right way to lead or follow, and no universal set of competencies or behaviors to adopt.

- There needs to be more emphasis on the role of followership as opposed to an infatuation with leadership.
- Leaders and members of the organization need to embrace uncertainty and renounce their mutual quest for discursive closure seeking for stability and harmony. This means that they all need to accept that ambiguity and conflict are a part of the processes of all organizational life and change. (p. 93)

Different departments and people could perceive and experience organizational changes differently, and thus in my study, I will consider their contextual and situational factors which may affect their leadership practices. I will also observe and examine the interactions and dialogues among MMs and their stakeholders inside the organization in the light of the above process and group dynamics. In the following section, I will look for empirical findings from leadership and management studies about the practices of MMs in leading change.

Empirical Findings of Leadership-as-Practice of MMs

I have reviewed the three major sources of literature (middle manager and collective leadership, change management theories and processes, and leadership-as-practice theories) to explore the leadership-as-practice of MMs in MNC settings under the Asia Pacific context. From a subjectivist ontology, humans are very much involved in shaping practices, and researchers study the meanings that people give to the mundane everyday work in which they are engaged (Cunliffe & Hibbert, 2016). It is in the daily routine that people live out their meanings and practices instead of some special moment of leadership. Moreover, the leadership concepts that MMs know may not necessarily be the same as what they practice. Therefore, I will review the LAP empirical studies on the actual practice of middle managers in leading organizational changes.

Based on the foundational literature review and analysis of the three sources of knowledge, I searched for empirical studies that apply those frameworks to research on leadership-as-practice of MMs in organizational changes. Most of the leadership research had been conducted among top leaders and middle managers during the *normal* business operations, trying to study the relationship between leadership and general leadership effectiveness, behavioral complexity, team interaction, team identification, and entrepreneurship (Chang et al., 2017; Edwards & Gill, 2012; Hooijberg, 1996; Kearney & Gebert, 2009; Kim & Vandenberghe, 2018; Lehmann-Willenbrock et al., 2015; Michaelis et al., 2010). Only a few studies have examined leadership behaviors of MMs in change management (Binci et al., 2016; Feng et al., 2016).

Moreover, most of those studies were quantitative, applying assessment tools to measure leadership qualities or behaviors to draw correlations between variables under study. Some research has studied middle managers' involvement in the process of strategic planning (Collier et al., 2004) and sense-making of middle managers in change management (Raes et al., 2007). The research articles do not address what MMs should do particularly in relation to their teams, top management, peer managers, and other stakeholders in the external business environment for leading organizational change. Pointedly, little research has been done in Asia based on leadership-as-practice theory about MMs.

Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) conducted a case study of managers in a large, international knowledge-intensive company and they suggested from their findings a rethinking of leadership, taking the mundane, almost trivial, aspects of what managers actually do, seriously. They further asserted that leadership, after all, might not be so necessary when the managers were working with highly competent knowledge workers. Moreover, the managers did not exhibit those typical leadership behaviors that many writers wrote about. Instead, the managers were simply listening, talking to people, and to some extent not doing much leadership work from the traditional leadership paradigm. They, however, admitted that the situation might only apply to a knowledge-intensive company where most of the engineers and knowledge workers were very autonomous and competent to do their work, and thus, they preferred to be left alone.

Alvesson and Jonsson (2018) had similar observations when they were conducting a case study on a middle manager in an international manufacturing company. They found that a manager's understanding of leadership may or may not guide practice, because leadership practices (attempts) can vary, be divisive, and that a manager's advocacy efforts are driven by a multitude of different, partly opposing, forces, which may in turn “decouple” ideas and behavior in leadership practices.

Paroutis and Pettigrew (2007) studied the actual practices of strategy teams in a FTSE-100 multibusiness firm, through a longitudinal case study with 36 interviews. Their findings showed that both actions and interactions of corporate center and business unit strategy teams are important during the strategy process. Moreover, the acting and knowing of those teams was dynamic, collective, and distributed within the multibusiness firm across two interrelated levels: within the team and across teams, each involving both recursive and adaptive activities. The definitions of practices used by strategy teams during strategizing include: *executing* (the strategy team undertakes day-to-day, routine activities), *reflecting* (the strategy team reflects on and modifies past ways of conducting (or not conducting) strategy), *initiating* (the strategy team initiates or shapes new ideas about changes in the content and process of strategy), *coordinating* (the strategy team leads and controls the activities of other teams or managers), *supporting* (the strategy team provides strategy knowledge and resources to other managers or teams), *collaborating* (the strategy team jointly develops strategic reports and ideas across organizational levels), and *shaping context* (the strategy team changes the contextual conditions within which other teams strategize; Paroutis & Pettigrew, 2007, p. 110).

Stensaker and Falkenberg (2007) conducted a longitudinal study on a large Norwegian oil company undergoing corporate-wide change. The change initiative could be described as a business process reengineering initiative. The change was applied to three business units, and the researchers were studying response and activities in the business units related to the corporate change initiative in a period of six years (1996–2001). They traced organizational responses to change over time (by *transforming* the organization, by *loose coupling* and making symbolic changes, by *customizing* the change to better fit the context, or by *corrupting* the change and reinforcing status quo among the three business units. They found that responses to change initially varied across business units, but over time most organizational changes were customized to fit the business unit context. Most importantly, they argued that organizational-level responses and how those responses developed over time could be explained by examining individual's interpretative responses, that is, sense-making of the corporate change initiative.

Fairhurst (2007) pointed out that while discursive approaches to leadership are varied, the common thread is that they all take a social constructionist stance. That is, they focus on the process of leadership and the communicative construction of leader (and follower) identities in interaction (Clifton & Dai, 2020). The leader, from such a social constructionist perspective, is the manager of meaning because it is he/she who has most influence in the process of constructing organizational reality, and so authors the organization and those who inhabit it (Clifton, 2014; Raelin, 2007). Being (identity) affects the meaning making of the leader as well as the team and organization (Alvesson, 2010; Alvesson & Karreman, 2007; Carroll & Levy, 2008). On the other hand, the programming of the culture, organization, and team also impacts on the leader's sense-making and identity (Alvesson & Robertson, 2016).

Harding et al. (2014) explored the identity of the middle manager using focus groups of middle managers from England's National Health Service (NHS) discussing their work. The methodology of the study was qualitative, interview-based, single case study containing multiple mini-cases. The study involved two stages: interviews with the senior management teams of 34 constituent organizations of the NHS and focus group discussions with middle managers in six of those organizations. The selected middle managers were responsible for implementing many changes imposed by the Department of Health. The subject of discussion was about the implementation of a talent management strategy required by the Department of Health in 2004. The group size of those six focus groups ranged from three to five middle managers. Discussions lasted 60–90 minutes, were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Their empirical data showed that middle managers were engaging in primarily three discourses: (a) *conformist/managerialist*, that is, conforming to instructions about how to implement strategy, (b) *critical/managerialist*, that is, agreeing with the strategy but disagreeing with the way it is being implemented, and (c) *critical/resistant*, that is, critical of the whole strategy and voicing opposition to its implementation (p. 1220). They concluded that the middle managers were taking on both controller/controlled and resister/resisted identities in managing organizational change. In my study, I will also observe the discourses of MMs with their top management and their team members, instead of whether those identities are adopted by them. Moreover, I will explore how they balance those tensions brought about by the complex relationships in MNCs and dialogue with their team members and within themselves.

Azambuja and Islam (2019) recognized the ambivalence of middle managerial work in coping with conflicting expectations and frustrating demands in organizational hierarchy. They applied the concept of boundary work, characterized as “the work of negotiating between multiple roles in the interstices of organizational groups” (Azambuja & Islam, 2019, p. 534). They used *organizational ethnography* as their research approach to observe the lived experience of MMs of a Brazilian accounting firm in their ambivalent experiences of agency and instrumentalization in everyday experience. The context of the ethnographic study was the daily work lives of middle managers, with an emphasis on their interactions with top managers and subordinates in formal (e.g., meetings and training sessions) and less formal (e.g., everyday work and lunchtime) conversations and situations. The researcher also used shadowing and interviews to collect data about the middle managers’ boundary work and reflections. There were all together 12 MMs being observed and interviewed. The number of interviews with those managers ranged from six to 24.

Azambuja and Islam (2019) found that MMs described themselves as proactive and reflexive agents, on the one hand, yet also as lacking autonomy and a sense of belonging, on the other. They examined the forces of boundary work in terms of emancipation (that is, sense of mastery, autonomy, empowerment, and reflexivity) and alienation (that is, fatigue, lack of self-determination, and detachment from their profession and coworkers). The study concluded that MMs routinely shifted between being agential and reflexive mediators (boundary subjects) and interfacing and coordination devices (boundary objects) (Azambuja & Islam, 2019, p. 558). Azambuja and Islam's organizational ethnography research inspires me to use shadowing and interviewing with MMs in reflexivity and sensitivity in the processes of their interactions and dialogues with their bosses, peers, and team members.

I have summarized the empirical findings of the LAP and related theories studies in Table 2.1. In Table 2.1, the studies were categorized according to their theories, concepts, identities (if applicable), and practices as findings. Heifetz and Linsky's (2002) study drew on the adaptive leadership theory, whereas Drath et al. (2008) had boundary spanning leadership as theoretical origin. The majority of the other empirical studies were based on LAP theories. The concepts developed from the studies were very much based on their theoretical origins and epistemological assumptions. Some studies focused more on identities (Alvesson, 2010; Alvesson & Karreman, 2007; Alvesson & Robertson, 2016; Azambuja & Islam, 2019; Carroll & Levy, 2008; Clifton & Dai, 2020; Fairhurst, 2007; Harding et al., 2014), whereas others

Table 2.1

Findings of Empirical Studies on LAP of MMs

Authors	Theories	Concepts	Identities	Practices
Heifetz & Linsky (2002)	Adaptive leadership	· Technical work · Adaptive work · Holding environment · Sacred heart	Not applicable (N.A.)	· Going up to the “balcony” · Think politically · Orchestrate the conflict · Give the work back to the stakeholders · Hold steady · Build an adaptive culture
Drath et al. (2008); Ernst & Chrobot-Mason (2011)	Boundary spanning leadership	· Direction · Alignment · Commitment · Nexus effect	N.A.	· *Buffering* (creating safety) · *Reflecting* (fostering respect) · *Connecting* (building trust) · *Mobilizing* (developing community) · *Weaving* (advancing interdependence) · *Transforming* (enabling reinvention)
Alvesson & Sveningsson (2003)	LAP	· Leadership after all might not be so necessary when the managers were working with highly competent knowledge workers	N.A.	· *Listening* · *Talking* to people · To some extent *not doing much* leadership work from the tradition leadership paradigm
Alvesson & Jonsson (2018)	LAP	· A manager’s understanding of leadership may or may not guide practice	N.A.	· Leadership practices (attempts) can vary, be divisive · A manager’s advocacy efforts are driven by a multitude of different, partly opposing, forces, which may in turn “decouple” ideas and behavior in leadership practices
Paroutis & Pettigrew (2007)	LAP	Practices used by strategy teams during strategizing	N.A.	· *Executing* (the strategy team undertakes day-to-day, routine activities) · *Reflecting* (the strategy team reflects on and modifies past ways of conducting (or not conducting) strategy) · *Initiating* (the strategy team initiates or shapes new ideas about changes in the content and process of strategy) · *Coordinating* (the strategy team leads and controls the activities of other teams or managers) · *Supporting* (the strategy team provides strategy knowledge and resources to other managers

Authors	Theories	Concepts	Identities	Practices
				or teams) • *Collaborating* (the strategy team jointly develops strategic reports and ideas across organizational levels) • *Shaping context* (the strategy team changes the contextual conditions within which other teams strategize)
Stensaker & Falkenberg (2007)	LAP	Organizational responses to change over time: • by *transforming* the organization, • by *loose coupling* and making symbolic changes, • by *customizing* the change to better fit the context, or • by *corrupting* the change and actually reinforcing status quo) among the three business units.	N.A.	• Organizational-level responses and how those responses developed over time could be explained by examining individual's *interpretative responses* (that is, sense-making of the corporate change initiative)
Alvesson (2010); Alvesson & Karreman (2007); Alvesson & Robertson (2016); Carroll & Levy (2008); Clifton & Dai (2020); Fairhurst (2007)	LAP	• *Discursive* approaches to leadership • *Being* (identity) affects the meaning making of the leader as well as the team and organization • The *programming* of the culture, organization, and team also impacts on the leader's sense-making and identity	The leader, from such a social constructionist perspective, is the *manager of meaning*	
Harding et al. (2014)	LAP	The middle managers were taking on both controller/controlled and resister/resisted identities in managing organizational change.	1) *Conformist / managerialist* 2) *Critical / managerialist* 3) *Critical / resistant*	
Azambuja &	LAP	The forces of	Middle managers	

Authors	Theories	Concepts	Identities	Practices
Islam (2019)		*boundary work* in terms of emancipation and alienation	routinely shifted between being *agential and reflexive mediators* (boundary subjects) and *interfacing and coordination devices* (boundary objects)	

were more about practices (Alvesson & Jonsson; 2018; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Paroutis & Pettigrew, 2007; Stensaker & Falkenberg, 2007).

The review of empirical articles on the topics has confirmed my observation that there has been very little research done on leadership-as-practice of middle managers in organizational change. As expected, most of that research was conducted in Europe, and no research has been done in Asia based on leadership-as-practice theory about MMs. Most of the LAP empirical studies were focused on identities and roles of MMs (Harding et al., 2014). Stensaker and Falkenberg's (2007) study only looked at the general responses of MMs to corporate-wide change, but not their leadership-as-practice during organizational change in relation to the people.

Paroutis and Pettigrew (2007) studied the practice of the strategy teams within their teams and across the other teams, but the strategy teams have very different mission and composition in terms of team membership (that is, they are not the typical MMs who take charge of business operations and teams whom I intend to study). Azambuja and Islam's study (2019) focuses only on boundary work of MMs, but it offers a blueprint on how organizational ethnography could be used as a research method on leadership practices of MMs in a business setting.

Conclusion

The roles and practices of leadership for MMs are very different from the top leaders in strategy process (Floyd & Wooldridge, 2017). Middle managers are really the leaders who could make a difference in organizational changes and strategy process (Floyd & Wooldridge, 2017; Hill, 2019; Tinline & Cooper, 2016). They might well be the missing link or the neglected partners in many organizational changes, which often end up in failure as Kotter aptly pointed out (Kotter, 1994). The challenges to the MMs in change management are paramount in the process of visioning, communicating, and implementing change.

The very fact that they are in the middle puts them in the awkward situation between the balcony and the ball room (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). They must ride on the razor’s edge of their different roles and functions in the organization. Adaptive leadership theories help us refocus the role of MMs in leading change with the teams, the organization, and external stakeholders, as a whole, in relation to the rapidly changing contexts. Middle managers are one of the most important agents in organizational changes where they interact with external parties and other agents in the organization, while they apply adaptive leadership to facilitate the process of problem identification and adaptive work among their teams and stakeholders, in response to the challenges from outside or within (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

Leadership-as-practice theories take another step further to point out that leading organizational change is not a linear view of leadership, with the leader on the top driving the organization and teams towards the designated goals; it is a dynamic and emerging reality with all the agents interacting and influencing each other, causing the movement of the whole organization. Middle managers should endeavor to build a positive change climate in their departments or teams while they simultaneously empower themselves in connecting with the top management and other agents in and out of the organizations. In these keyways they act as the middle persons between the top management and their teams. They are both the interpreters and the translators to create meanings and to make sense of what is happening during organizational changes (Bendixen et al., 2017; Lee, 1994; Pritchett & Pound, 1988, 1992, 1993). They focus on helping the team members through continuous dialogues, which enable them to unlearn past patterns and adapt to new changes as fast as they could, with a clear purpose and vision in mind (Cameron & Green, 2015; Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2011; Kanter et al., 1992).

Many the leadership studies on MMs in organizational change conducted in Asia Pacific context were based on transformational leadership framework and quantitative research methodologies (Chang et al., 2017; Feng et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2013). This literature review shows that, so far, next to nothing has been done empirically on leadership-as-practice of MMs in MNC during organizational change in the Asia Pacific context.

To understand the practices of MMs during organizational change, I will need to look for a research method that enables me to observe the dialogues and actions of MMs during real time, not what they think or say they do in questionnaires or focus groups. Now I will turn to the methodology which I will apply for my study of leadership practices of MMs of MNCs under the Asia Pacific context during organizational change.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The ultimate objective of this study is to study the actual leadership practices of MMs that enrich the perspectives and assumptions of MMs' roles and functions, change management approaches, and leadership-as-practice (LAP) during organizational change at multilevel across time under the multinational corporation (MNC) organizational and the Asia Pacific cultural contexts. I conducted an organizational ethnography with a MNC which was going through organizational changes. I spent an extensive period of time in the organization being immersed in the teams and the processes of change, so that I could observe the day-to-day interactions and dialogues of the MMs and their significant others in the organization.

In this chapter, I will firstly explain the ontological and epistemological assumptions of my ethnographic study. Secondly, I will outline the situational and multilevel approach of this study with the understanding that the situational factor is organizational change, and the multilevel involves the individual, team, and organization. Thirdly, I will examine the research method of organizational ethnography, and explain why it is the most proper method for my study. Fourthly, I will describe the research design based on my understanding of the research site, and the access to the site for my study. I will also outline the data collection methods and data analysis processes. Then, I will carefully examine the possible ethical challenges in this organizational ethnography with reference to my business relationship with the potential sites and my prior coaching relationships with the MMs of the site. Finally, I will outline the schedule and the date of completion of this dissertation.

Ontological and Epistemological Assumptions

There are multiple approaches to practice-based studies, and it is important to address the fundamental ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin my research attempt (Cunliffe & Hibbert, 2016). Cunliffe (2015) aptly summarized the “problematics” of objectivism, subjectivism and intersubjectivism in ontology, epistemology, and practice. The assumptions of the methodology of this study are very much under the categories of subjectivism and intersubjectivism. An intersubjective ontology is based on the notion of “we-ness,” that the leaders and the members of the team are always selves-in-relation-to-others (Cunliffe & Hibbert, 2016).

The leadership practices of MMs and the understanding of such practices by the leaders and the teams are shaped among them (intentionally and otherwise), under the particular organizational and situational contexts, in their relationally responsive interactions and conversations (Shotter, 2008). This reasoning comes very close to the notion of “relational leadership” (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012), that is, a perspective on leadership as social processes of relating, processes that are coconstructed by several interactors. Such processes are not mechanically reversible and controllable; instead, they are characterized by a social flow of interacting and connecting, whereby organizations, groups, leaders, leadership, and so forth are constantly under construction and re-construction (Chia, 1995; Hernes, 2007). The empirical study of leadership-as-practice therefore should be focused on leadership practices as constructed in interactions over time (Crevani et al., 2009).

Based on these epistemological assumptions, the organizational ethnography approach that I will use is categorized as "confessional ethnography" as described by Neyland (2008, p. 54). According to Neyland (2008), the ethnographer is engaged in the construction of meaning or making sense through "reflexivity" (p. 53) together with the members of the organization under study. More specifically, the ethnographer plays a reflexive role in the setting as an adequate member of the setting and forms particular relations with the members of the site. Such reflexivity, under the confessional mode, become features of ethnographic analysis. The epistemological approach focuses on the observation and experience of the ethnographer as a researcher being in and interacting with the members of the setting (Neyland, 2008). In the next section, I will explain why this study will take on a situational and multilevel approach to explore the leadership practice questions in organizational change and multinational setting.

The Situational and Multilevel Approach of This Study

Leadership studies have shifted from the leaders in terms of traits, personalities, competency, and behaviors to situational factors (e.g., contexts, constraints, interactions among people), or some combination thereof which determines the behavior and actions of the individual leaders (Carroll et al., 2008; Yammarino & Bass, 1991). The *person* views of leadership argue that personal characteristics, resulting from nature and/or nurture, explain the leaders' behaviors, attitudes, perceptions, and leadership styles, which in turn yield different results in terms of followership, business results, organizational and social impact (Yammarino & Bass, 1991, p. 122). The *situation* view, in contrast, advocates that contextually relevant factors, either created and/or imposed, account for attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions regarding leadership. The combined view, *person-situation*, proposes that neither one of those two views is adequate in explaining the leadership phenomenon. Instead, the person-situation view sees leadership as the interaction over continuous and reciprocal influences between the person's attributes and the situational factors over time (Nye, 2014). The situational factors in this exploratory study are the organizational change in MNC setting within the Asia Pacific context.

Yammarino and Bass (1991) thought that a multiple-level approach can be developed to integrate and clarify the various person, situation, and person-situation views of leadership. In my study, MMs are the individuals working and interacting with their significant others (superiors, subordinates, peers, and external stakeholders) under the organizational change in MNC setting within the Asia Pacific context. To understand the leadership practices of MMs, I will need to consider the person, situation, and person-situation views of leadership. The study of leadership-as-practice of MMs requires an assessment of the levels of analysis involved, and the influences of levels on the leadership practices. Lastly, time and timing of managerial practices are critical, and depend on levels of analysis.

Maupin et al. (2020) proposed an integrated approach with organizational discourse analysis, relational event modeling, and dynamic network analysis for the study of collective leadership with consideration of time, context, and multiple levels. I applied those methods during my ethnographic study, whenever appropriate, particularly when I needed to understand the organization context and the relationships or networks between the MMs and their significant others in the organization.

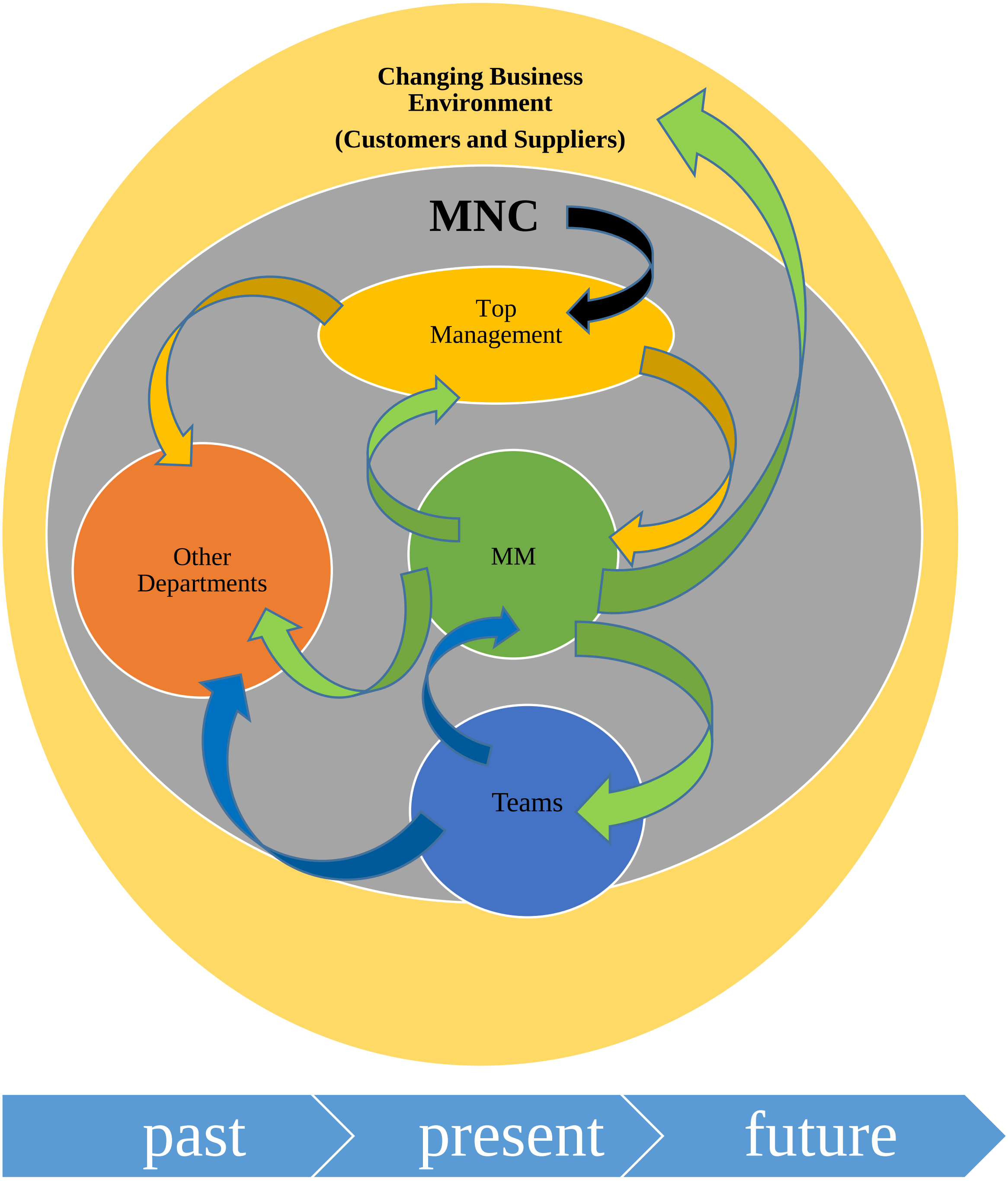
Sklaveniti (2020) introduced *turning points* (fleeting moments of change) as one way of studying collective leadership, which allows to unpack moments that connect and explore how the leaders and other stakeholders generate co-action and collective leadership processes (p. 544). The planning and preparation work before the announcement could involve strategic analysis, discussion, and decision-making processes. The announcement was done by the top management to address the concerns of the organization members and other stakeholders. Then, there was a transition before the new organizations, systems, or ways of working were implemented. Once the change was fully implemented, it was after the change.

Figure 3.1 describes the multilevel dimensions of this study and the interactions and dialogues that the MMs had with their significant others in the organization particularly the top management, peer managers, and their team members. More specifically, in my study, I tried to understand the thoughts and actions of the individual MMs (person level), the interactions between the MMs and their team members (team level), the interactions among the MMs, their superiors, and peers (organizational level) under the organizational change of the MNC in Asia Pacific (situation) at different stages of change (time) in order to understand the process. Figure 3.1 also points out that the temporal consideration was important in data collection, particular at those critical organizational change events or leadership moment where the MMs had interactions and dialogues with their significant others in the organization. The processes of the ending, transition, and beginning of the particular organizational change and other related changes will be the other temporal factors for my study.

To understand the process of change over time as depicted in Figure 3.1 in this specific organization, organizational ethnography was used as the research method for this study. Azambuja and Islam's (2019) organizational ethnography was particularly relevant to my study. It offered a blueprint on how ethnography could be used as a research method on leadership practices of MMs. In the following section I will describe what organizational ethnography is, why it is relevant for this study, and how it was used in my study.

Figure 3.1

Levels and Contexts of MMs in MNC Settings



Overview of Research Design

The approach I used in this LAP research is a qualitative organizational ethnography. This organizational ethnography seeks to describe the actions, dialogues, interactions, team dynamics, and organization context based on the participants' accounts and the researcher's observations. The resulting data will be analyzed through reflexive interpretation, that is, the researchers consider how they handle empirical material and analyzes how they make their acts of interpretation and reporting conscious to themselves and their readers with continuous reflectivity (Gregorzewski, 2021).

Qualitative research is a very broad term that embraces research methodologies that deal with phenomena by analyzing experiences, behaviors, and relations without the use of statistics and mathematics, and the processing of numerical data (Hennink et al., 2010; Merriam, 2009). It can be defined as a sequence of interpretive techniques applied by the researchers who seek to describe, decode, and translate concepts and phenomena, rather than to collect quantitative data of certain phenomena in particular research settings (van Maanen, 1983). Qualitative research provides benefits such as: (a) supporting the researcher to understand the nature and complexity of the phenomenon being considered, (b) enabling research in relatively new areas of research, and (c) supporting the investigation of a phenomenon in its natural environment (Benbasat et al., 1987). Because of the multilevel interactive nature of the questions I am asking in this study, the qualitative approach is best suited for the study of leadership-as-practice of MMs. The contextual contingencies and processes of leadership or leader-member interactions must be understood, and their dialogues and actions interpreted, to identify emergence of themes and categories that explain how context impacts leadership practices.

Organizational Ethnography

Ethnographic research methods are growing in popularity within the field of organization studies (Brannan et al., 2007; Neyland, 2008; Yanow, 2009). Indeed, organizational ethnography can be used to study leadership, particularly LAP, because leadership involves process and time in a particular context or culture. Ethnographic methods provide a vehicle to conduct research and to pursue action in ways that resonate with the goals, values, and core mission of the field of LAP (Cunliffe, 2010; van Maanen, 2010, 2011, 2015; Watson, 2011).

Organizational ethnography in MNC setting could be challenging when the companies are often concerned about security, reputation, and confidentiality issues. Similar to other ethnographic research, the organizational ethnographer needs to influence the decision makers to get their permission to undertake the research on their companies and to manage the complicated working environment within the organization. Lastly, it is important to maintain the proper role and identity of the researcher with the concerned decision makers, MMs, and their team members, when they might perceive the researcher more as a change management consultant/coach during the data collection process (Case et al., 2014; Neyland, 2008).

To limit the scope of this study, I defined MMs as one to two levels below the top management in a country or regional levels of MNC settings. The important differentiation is that MMs are not the ones who initiate the organizational changes, and they are *not* involved in the strategic decision-making process. Middle managers are informed by their top tier executives after the top management make the strategic decision about change, and then they are expected to execute the change in their respective divisions or departments in the subsequent weeks and months. On some occasions, they could be impacted by the change itself. They could be required to communicate with their teams and to execute the change. They could be caught in the middle, bearing the pressure from the top to deliver change outcomes and results, while managing the resistance and grievances of their team members about the change.

Lastly, it is important to note that the theoretical origins of leadership theories, change management theories, and LAP as outlined in Chapter II only served as initial guiding lights, not the lenses, for my ethnographic study. I was careful to maintain an open mind to explore any approaches or practices that were outside the original scope of my understanding about leadership practices of MMs. Moreover, as I mentioned in Chapter I, it was beyond the scope of this research to have in-depth exploration into the cultural contexts (corporate, national, and global levels) of the research site. I only attempted to explore the key cultural elements as reflected in the ethnographic discovery that could have affected the leadership-as-practice of the MMs in relation to the organizational change.

Now I will turn to the ethnographic design with the particular research site in mind. I will briefly introduce the background of the research site and why it was chosen as subject for my study. Then, I will discuss the ethnographic strategy and access to the site and the target participants.

Research Site

The research site is a European MNC, which manufactures high-tech products for banking and other industries. The company had three manufacturing facilities in Shenzhen, China. They planned to move to a new location (within 10 miles of the existing site) in Shenzhen and to build a bigger site which could accommodate and integrate all the existing three facilities. The company completed the renovation work and planned to move into the new location in September to December 2020 by phases. The whole relocation and integration process was completed by the end of April 2021. The company had also experienced challenges in the market when their new product had not generated many demands and their resources were not fully utilized. The COVID-19 crisis had further impacted the company, but it had also brought new business opportunities to the Shenzhen site because other worldwide facilities had been badly hit by COVID-19 while the Shenzhen plant continued its operations.

The MMs of the Shenzhen Site are the eight department heads (DHs), who report directly to the Plant Director (PD). The focus of this ethnographic study is on exploring the LAP of the MMs in the European company under the Asia Pacific cultural context during organizational change. While I observed and analyzed the organization context and the organizational change situation, those eight MMs were the focal points of my study. The process and timing of change could require different practices of the MMs. The relocation itself could be less of an issue since the new location was not far away from the old locations of different sites. The subsequent integration of the different units and teams in one location and the possible reorganization of those units and teams could be one big organizational change to the MMs and their team members. The different units and teams could be impacted by the organizational change in different ways. Some units might be expanded, while others might be downsized or dispersed to other units. I explored how those employees reacted or react to the organizational change, and their actions in relation to their MMs and top leaders. How did the MMs learn to adapt to change? How did they help their team members learn and adapt to change? More importantly, I observed how the MMs responded to their team members, top leaders, peer managers, and other stakeholders during the change.

The advantage of this research site is that the relocation and integration exercise were conducted in September 2020 to early 2021. In this European company, the top management consists of the PD and the global Strategic Business Unit heads based in Europe. The department heads are really the middle managers to carry out the various functions of the company and to execute the decisions of the top management. Moreover, the MMs are familiar with the basic change management concepts and the three-step leading change process (visioning, communicating, and implementing), which could lead to the LAP phenomena of interest to this study.

Ethnographic Strategy

I spent six months, at least two days per week, at the Shenzhen Site with the management team, particularly the eight department heads, to understand and observe their leadership practices and their interactions with their teams, their top management, and other stakeholders during the organizational change. I could experience and observe the daily operations and interactions among the MMs with their significant others in the site. The team meetings, dialogues at the office or plant site, coffee/cafeteria conversations, communications between the PD and the MMs, and, most importantly, the MMs' leadership actions could be observed and analyzed during real time when they happened.

Ethnographic Access

Gaining access to organization and the members of the organization is critical in organizational ethnography (Neyland, 2008; van Maanen, 2011). Concerning this potential research site, I conducted transformational leadership training for the relocation exercise for the top and middle management team in 2018. I became familiar with the PD and the management team. In 2019, they invited me to conduct a series of leadership training workshops. Subsequently, I spent a period of four months in coaching the eight department heads on leadership, people management, and career development issues. Therefore, the PD, the MMs, and the third-tier managers/supervisors had known the researcher as trainer/coach. While I was still very much an outsider (Neyland, 2008, p. 16), I could gain the trust of the PD and the MMs more easily as an insider when they were willing to participate in this ethnographic study.

Geographically, the potential research site was only 10 miles away from my home and I could make it to the site on a day trip. However, I needed to cross the China/Hong Kong border, which became a challenge during COVID-19 border restrictions. Both governments had imposed 14–21 days quarantine period for any individual crossing the border. Initially I hoped that I could gain the permit to cross the border without the 14 days quarantine requirements by the end of December. However, the quarantine policy of the Chinese border had been tightened and I could only cross the border once into Mainland China with 21 days of quarantine, in early February till end of February.

Data Collection Methods

My study experienced a two month delay due to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process, and the unexpected 21 days quarantine policy brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic extended from 2020 to 2021. Finally, on March 1, 2021, I arrived at the research site, which I will name as RSX (a fictitious name) for easy reference in the following sections. I stayed in Shenzhen for the remaining six months until the study was finished on September 6, 2021.

The data collection methods of this organizational ethnography included direct observation, interviews, and document analysis available in open forums such as corporate websites, news reports, and other company records that the PD and the MMs provided to me for reference and analysis. During my six months of ethnographic study at the research site I sought to observe as closely as possible the interactions and dialogues between the MMs and their counterparts during the organizational change process, and to identify those leadership moments when those moments appeared during the process of change. Such leadership moments occurred when the MM adapted a positive identity in leading change, when the MM effectively made sense of the change to his/her team through communicating processes, when the MM demonstrated entrepreneurship and encouraged his/her members to greater entrepreneurship in the implementation of the change. Other leadership moments were observed when the MM showed adaptive leadership and boundary spanning leadership actions during the organizational change. Finally, leadership moments came about when the leader and the members of the team made deliberate efforts to foster the positive change team climate/culture during the organizational change.

Table 3.1

Data Collection Methods Applied in Different Settings

Data collection method	Setting	Target participants	Number of participants	Frequency and duration
Direct observation	Management team meeting	Executive team members	12–14	29 times; average once per week for 30–60 minutes each
Direct observation	Departmental management team meeting	Departmental management team members	10–30	10 times; 45–90 minutes
Direct observation	War Room meeting	Operation and engineering team members	5–6	2 times; 60 minutes
Direct observation	Management team monthly meeting	All executives and N-2 managers	40	3 times; 60 minutes
Direct observation	Plant tour	All operational staff in the plant	80	1 time; 90 minutes
Direct observation	Tea reception	All attendees	20–50	2 times; 30–40 minutes
Direct observation	Lunch with DHs including teatime and walk	DHs	4–6	About 40 times; 40–60 minutes
Direct observation	Shadowing exercise	2 DHs	Their contacts (1–20)	5 days per DH; 8–9 hours each day
Direct observation	Badminton game	All participants in the games	10–15	7 times; 2 hours each on Tuesday evening
Interviews	Semistructured interview	Top management and DHs	8	2 interviews each at the beginning and the end of the study
Interviews	Informal interview	N-2 or N-4 managers	6	30–60 minutes each

Data collection method	Setting	Target participants	Number of participants	Frequency and duration
Documents	Corporate website; simple organization charts	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.

Table 3.1 summarizes the data collection methods, sources of information, target participants, number of participants, frequencies, and durations of the data collection activities. This organization ethnography as showed in Table 3.1 was very much based on direct observation at the research site in different settings with the various target participants. Interviews were used only in the beginning and at the end of the study to capture the perspectives of the top management and the Big5 plus one about their leadership practice and organizational changes. Other informal interviews were applied for the conversations with several N-2 to N-4 staff for further exploration of particular issues. Documents were found mainly from the corporate websites and the few organization charts provided to the researcher by the HR department. In the following paragraphs I will outline how those data collection methods were used in my study.

Direct Observation

Ethnographic study conducted in the organization setting allows the researcher to collect data formally or informally through direct observation. In the direct observation exercise, I observed the dialogues, conversations, and interactions of the leaders and their team members during the six months of staying at the research site. Assuming that the phenomena of LAP of MMs had not been purely historical, some relevant social, organizational, or environmental conditions were available for observation (Azambuja & Islam, 2019; Neyland, 2008).

Alvesson and Jonsson (2018) suggested that managers' meanings of leadership may not correspond with what they do in practice. In other words, the managers may talk about the ideals of leadership qualities and behaviors, and they may even believe that they follow those ideals in their practice, but in reality, many of the managers could exhibit a totally different practice in real work situations. Some of those discrepancies in perception and expectation were identified in the in-depth interviews; some were only identified and compared in direct observation. This involved observations of department/team meetings, coffee corner conversations, factory work, day-to-day operations, cafeteria, classrooms, and the like. Less formally, direct observations were made throughout the researcher's fieldwork, including those occasions where he met with the DHs, their supervisors, and the team members for briefing sessions or interviews.

I tried to understand more thoroughly about the operations of the departments and the progress of the organizational change, to decide which groups, occasions, and locations could be valuable for observation and data collection. The subject matter of LAP naturally required direct observation to understand the real practice of leadership among the MMs and the teams. Most importantly, the emergence of leadership was only sensed and observed at the moment of emergence (Crevani et al., 2009). The MMs were able to articulate that emergence of leadership in the interviews and the team members also informed the researcher about that moment when they felt leadership was prominent and effective during the organizational change. Direct observation was a valuable and perhaps the only method to validate those accounts.

Interviews

Many LAP studies have applied interviewing as the main data collection method (Alvesson & Jonsson, 2018; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Harding et al., 2014; Paroutis & Pettigrew, 2007; Stensaker & Falkenberg, 2007). Azambuja and Islam (2019) also used interviews extensively in their organizational ethnography. At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of the participants and the meaning they make of that experience (Seidman, 2013). In this research, I followed Seidman's (2013) phenomenological interviewing approach with the goal of coming as close as possible to understanding the true *is* of the target participants' experience from their subjective point of view during organizational change. According to Seidman (2013), the three-interview series include: (a) focused life history of leadership and change experience in the past 24 months, (b) the details of those leadership and change experience, and (c) reflection on the meaning of leadership and change. I prepared a list of questions that I asked the MMs during the interviews (see Appendix A).

Making sense or making meaning requires that MMs look at how the factors in their lives and work interacted to bring them to their present situation (Seidman, 2013, p. 22). It also requires that they look at their present organizational change experience in detail and within the context in which it occurs. In my study, the interviewing process explored the past to clarify the changes that led participants to where they were. Further I probed the participants on what actions they were doing in their leadership roles to respond to changes and reactions of their team members to those changes. Lastly, I asked them about their thoughts and plans projecting to the future, in relation to their career and organizational change (Seidman, 2013). The inquiry was multilevel to include the MM as individual, the MM's interactions and dialogues with the team and other members in the organization, and the MM's interactions and dialogues with external stakeholders in the business environment.

In addition to the MMs, I interviewed the VP-Global Manufacturing and the PD of the Shenzhen Site to gain a deeper understanding about the change, their perceptions about the MMs and the whole organizational change, the organization and company culture. I also interviewed some of the direct reports of the department heads to gain a deeper understanding about their perceptions and experience of the leadership practices of the MMs as well as about the organizational change. Table 3.1 details the number of interviews that were conducted with those persons occupying different roles in the organization.

The interviews were conducted in English (for the foreign participants) or Mandarin (for the Chinese participants). Some of the interviews with the MMs were recorded with audio-recorder whenever consents from the participants could be obtained. The target participants, who were significant for my analysis, included the Plant Director (PD) and several DHs. Each interview lasted for 60 minutes to 90 minutes. I conducted two semistructured interviews with the VP, the PD, and the eight DHs apart from other informal conversations during lunch time and other occasions during the different stages of the organizational change. During those turning points or leadership moments, I used more frequent short interviews with the DHs to track their actions with temporal consideration. *Reflective dialogues* were be used in the semistructured interviews with the participants to allow more in-depth exploration into their practices. When I was doing interviewing, I was careful not to influence the participants with my preconceptions about leadership, change management, or leadership practices. I also emphasized that my role was a student researcher, and I would not provide any coaching or advice to the participants. I just wanted to understand the raw leadership-as-practice as show and report by the participants.

Some selected interviews, which had important content for further analysis and reporting, were transcribed, translated, and analyzed. I transcribed all the semistructured interviews with the PD and a few DHs. I did not record or translate the conversations that I had with the participants during day-to-day interactions at the research site unless such conversations showed the leadership moments or leadership practices that were of interest to this study. Some of those conversations were recorded in my daily field notes, which were kept chronologically.

Documents

I searched for open documents about the organization, the history, the organizational changes in the past and present, the values and cultures, or any information that was relevant to my study. The sources of documents were corporate websites and some simple organization charts provided to me by the HR department. The company treated their commercial secrets as highest priority for security. For that reason, I was careful not to ask the PD or the DHs for any documents concerning their business or products.

Data Collection and Analysis

All semistructured interviews were recorded in the form of interview notes taken after the interviews or audio-recording. Some selected interviews were transcribed. I took field notes about the MMs' actions and dialogues with the top management, the team members, peers managers, and other stakeholders in relation to the organizational changes. Direct observation and organizational ethnography reflexive notes were be made at once after the observation exercise, and on a daily basis, to record the significant observations and conversations during the ethnography period. The data collected were stored in a database organized according to the top management and the eight departments of the MMs. The researcher was careful to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the data collected. All field notes and audio-recording discs were kept in the researcher's personal handbag, which was stored in a locker with a lock during my stationing time at the research site. The hotel room where I was staying in Shenzhen was accessible by me only. All the notes and discs were stored in a private cabinet with lock. When the dissertation is completed, all those field notes and audio-recordings will be deleted as promised to the participants.

The ethnographic data collected were analyzed based on the research questions which the researcher set out to explore. The conceptual frameworks reviewed in Chapter II were important in framing the research questions and guiding me in the research design; they remained sensitizing concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006) or guiding lights to the researcher rather than lenses from which to observe or analyze data. After all my ethnography was to explore the actual leadership practice of the MMs as they emerged from the leadership moments and their daily interactions. The concepts of collective leadership, change management, and LAP could be applied, but not limited to, in examining and classifying the data (pattern matching and thematic analysis; Boyatzis, 1998; Yin, 2014). However, I was opened to explore new concepts and themes that could be revealed in the organizational ethnography with sensitivity (Neyland, 2008, p. 10) to build new theories around LAP of MMs.

Ethical Considerations

The MNC was my customer whom I had supplied training and coaching services between 2018–2019. I did not have extensive involvement with the top management though the PD had felt satisfied with my professional service, and he was gracious to support this case study of the manufacturing site. I would not receive any benefit from conducting this study with this client company and in turn they would not receive any financial or service benefits from me to allow me to conduct this research with them. The client company might be able to use the research findings to identify their business needs and to further develop their MMs and teams in the years to come. I may or may not involve in those future consulting assignments. There is no guarantee given to both parties.

The earlier coaching relationships with the MMs could be an asset in gaining trust and acceptance by the MMs for my organizational ethnography at their respective departments as well as in conducting interviews with them and their team members. However, I was careful to define my boundary as a researcher, lest they become confused about my identify and role, and expect me to provide coaching or solutions to their personal or organizational issues as a coach and consultant. To prevent the enmeshed roles issue I requested the PD to allow me to conduct a briefing to the management team and their team members about my research and my role in the period that I spent with them. I emphasized to the MMs that I would refrain from playing the coach and consultant role during my study at their site, and that I would refer them to look for coaching from another coach of Human Dynamic in Shenzhen whenever I felt that they were trying to engage me in coaching. I even instructed my staff in Shenzhen not to tell or ask me anything concerning the research site; I did not want to get involved in any business dealings during my study with the organization.

I asked the PD to sign on a consent form about the organizational ethnography at the research site in the 6-month period, with detailed explanation of the purpose and the scope of the study as well as the activities involved during the study. Likewise, I asked the MMs to sign on a consent form before the individual interviews, spelling out the confidentiality of the content and the future use of the data collected.

The implicit consent of voluntary participation in this organizational ethnography from the team members could possibly be obtained by an introduction of the MMs followed by a briefing by the researcher to their team members when the researcher was attending their team meetings. In the briefing I mentioned that if they did not want to be observed or interviewed by me for the purpose of this study, they could voice out to me directly any time during the study (I distributed my contact details to the team members at the end of the team meetings). Their consent or objection would be treated with greatest respect.

To protect the privacy and commercial secrets of the research site and the company, I took many measures to ensure anonymity by not specifying the particular industry, product, and country of origin of the holding company. For the individual participants, I used pseudonyms, protecting identities of the participants. In the data analysis, sometimes the actual roles of the participants were mentioned in some sections for the sake of clarity and deeper understanding of the dynamics. However, I was careful not to use direct quotations or to report something negative, which might impact on their careers as I anticipate that the management will read the report.

Conclusion

This organizational ethnography is focused on exploring the leadership practices of MMs of a European MNC during organizational changes within the Asia Pacific context. The duration of the ethnography was six months starting on March 1, 2021, until August 31, 2021. I did the data collection and analysis during the ethnography period as well as after the exit from the site. I spent five months completing the data analysis, discussion of findings, and writing of Chapters IV, V, and VI starting in July 2021 and completing in January 2022. In the next chapters I will first describe the process of immersion during my ethnographic study in Chapter IV, and then present the findings integrating the data collected and the theoretical origins of my study in Chapter V. Finally, I will discuss the contributions and significance of my findings, the limitations and future research opportunities of my study in Chapter VI.

CHAPTER IV: ETHNOGRAPHIC IMMERSION INTO THE ORGANIZATION

In the anthropological ethnography, the immersion is the process of understanding and experiencing the culture of the community or tribe under study. It is like going into the various layers of the culture to get to the core of the matter. Immersion in the organizational ethnography context is about gaining acceptance, trust, openness, and respect from the organization under study. The RSX-SZ site is a highly secured manufacturing facility. Therefore, I needed to gain the trust from the top management and the department heads (DHs) before I negotiated with them on the entries into the physical premises and their respective departments. The immersion process could be very political, sensitive, private, and personal.

I have learned from my *scuba diving experience* of immersion in that I must start from the surface, slowly dive into the ocean, and stay at a certain level to adjust to the water pressure and the under-water environment before immersing further down. If I want to see certain fish or under-water creatures, I must reach the particular reefs at certain-depths and look for signs of the fish or creatures purposefully and patiently. The leadership-as-practice of the DHs is the *fish* that I want to see. Before I could see the fish, I must first immerse into the depth of the organization and get close to the *reefs* (meetings, shop floor interactions, coaching sessions, or any places and situations where leadership-as-practice might occur).

This chapter is organized around five major sections based on the diving metaphor. At the surface level, I will tell the story of *my arrival and introduction*, *gaining entries to the organization and teams* by being present at their team meetings and touring the highly secured shop floors. Then, I will talk about my *diving in and focusing on the Big Five Plus One* (the six key department heads)*, familiarizing other staff by meeting them in different reefs*, that is, participating in their badminton games. Finally, I will discuss my *chasing the fish with the PD, DHs, and VP* through individual interviews and shadowing exercises. At the end of this chapter, I will reflect about defining the boundaries as a researcher during the ethnographic study. Before I dive in, I will describe the landscape around the organization including the organization background and the structure of the management team more from the insider perspective, in contrast to the background information of Chapter III.

The Organization Background

The organization, RSX (fictitious name), is a European multinational corporation (MNC) which operates in 180 countries around the world with close to 15,000 employees from 80 nationalities. RSX generates more than €2 billion revenue annually from different markets, applying technology to their products and solutions. It ranks number one in several product segments and geographical regions. RSX is a new organization, named after the merger of their original company and another US-based company in 2017. To protect the confidentiality of the research site, I will not go further in describing their country of origin, holding companies, products, and markets. It serves the purpose of this research to say that RSX's headquarters is in Europe, and it has its Asia Pacific regional office located in Singapore. In China, RSX also has other offices in eastern China and northern China, but RSX Shenzhen (RSX-SZ) is the site of my study. RSX-SZ is the only manufacturing facility in China, and it has been recognized as the leading production site of RSX in terms of performance, capacity, quality, and even staff engagement level (based on the results of Pulse Check 2021—the RSX global staff engagement survey conducted in early March 2021).

The RSX-SZ was founded in 2001. In 2004, it moved into the major plant site in one of the industrial parks in SZ. In 2008, it set up the process and equipment to manufacture two high-tech products at the SZ site, after it had successfully obtained certain certifications. In 2010, RSX founded another facility to produce another product. In 2015, the third facility was built to produce another major product focusing on the huge China market.

Relocation and Reorganization

In 2017, RSX decided to integrate the three sites and to move all the facilities to a new site. Their original plan was to move to another location in the northern part of SZ, but in 2018, the landlord abruptly refused to fulfill their agreement. RSX then searched and signed a new lease at the existing site. The whole relocation project, including renovation and integration of the three facilities and teams, was their major organization change started in 2018. In September 2020, RSX-SZ moved into the new plant by phases. The new organization structure was announced in October 2020. All the departments and employees operated in the new facility by December 2020. The relocation project was completed officially in April 2021.

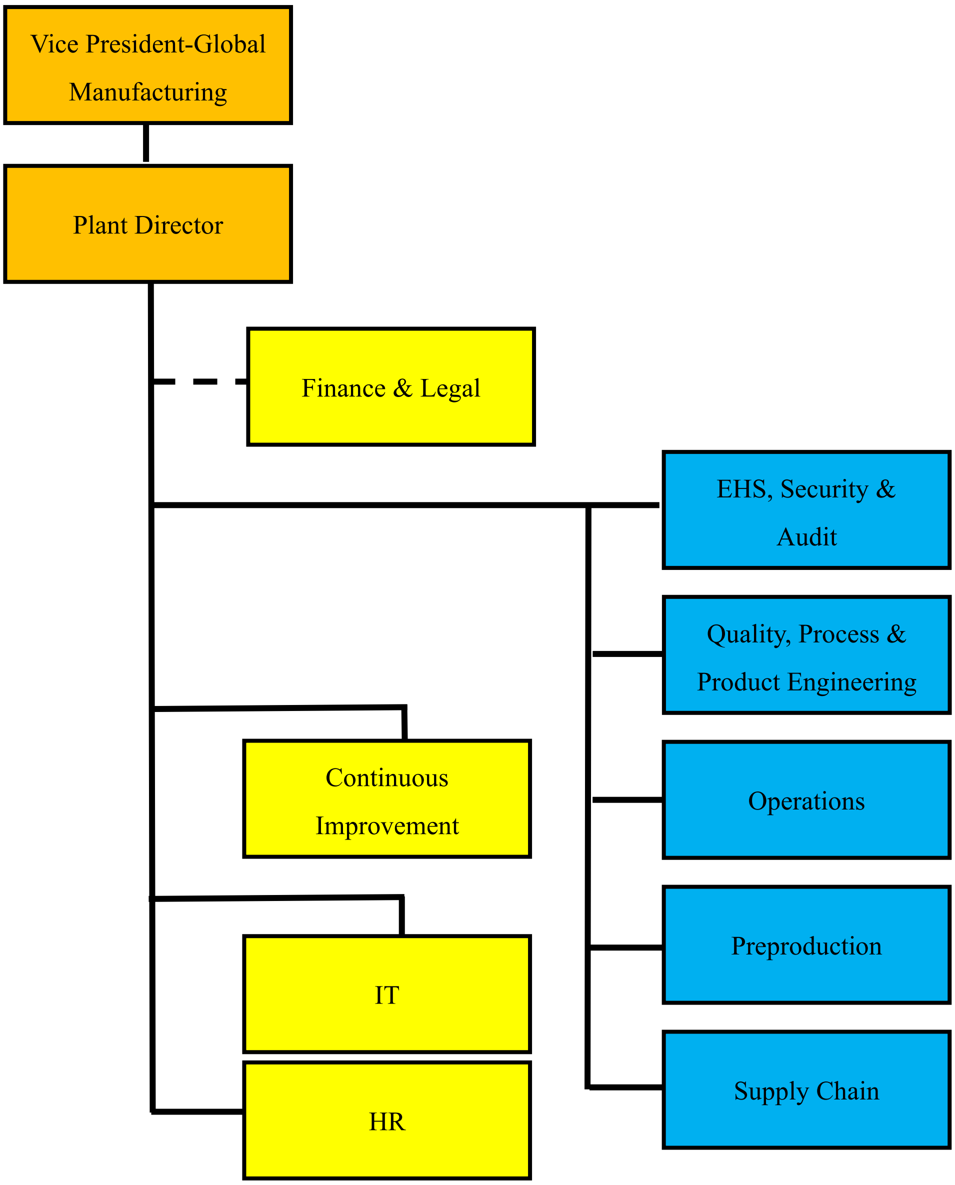
RSX-SZ has around 1,000 employees with 10+ expatriates from Europe and other countries working at the regional and the plant levels. The majority of the workforce are male, and they are direct labor (semiskilled workers working at the shop floors). The other employees are technical engineers, technicians, quality assurance, planning and supply chain, finance, IT, HR, and other professional workers. Most of those workers are between 20–45 years of age, with seniority between 1–3 years as majority; around 20% are over 10–20 years. There is a seniority gap between the two strata.

The Management Team and Their Work Teams

The new RSX-SZ organization structure consists of the Vice President-Global Manufacturing (VP), the Plant Director (PD), five major departments, and four supporting functional departments (see Figure 4.1). In the organizational chart on the top of the organization represents the top management, that is, the VP and the PD (marked in orange color in the organization chart). It should be noted that the VP was the PD of RSX-SZ before he was promoted to the VP position in September 2020 and that the same VP gave me the permission to do the ethnographic study at the site.

Figure 4.1

Organization Structure of the RSX-SZ



The new PD was promoted to this position in October 2020. The VP is still sitting in the RSX-SZ site; his office is next to the PD's office. There are other managers who belong to the corporate or regional offices sitting in the RSX-SZ site, including the North Asia Finance

Team, global procurement, and preproduction. As evident in Figure 4.1, the five major departments (marked in blue color in the organization chart) include: (a) operations, (b) preproduction, (c) quality, product, and process, (d) supply chain, and (e) EHS (environment, health, and safety), security, and audit. The supporting functions (marked in yellow color in the organization chart) are finance and legal, continuous improvement (CI), information technology (IT), and human resources (HR).

At RSX-SZ they call the department heads (DHs) as “N-1” (N is the PD) and the managers as “N-2.” There are “N-3” and “N-4” down in the hierarchy who usually are supervisors and professional staff as individual contributors. *The focus of my study is on the DHs as the middle managers* (marked by blue color in Figure 4.1). The DHs are the persons in charge of their respective departments, and they supervise the N-2 and other levels of staff in their departments. The bottom layers are the direct labor or operators who work at the shop floors in the production lines. The sizes of the departments ranged from 10 to a few hundreds.

Tales From the Ethnographic Immersion

The above descriptions should suffice to provide the historical and organizational background of the research site. Now I will move on to the tale of my ethnographic immersion. More specifically, I will describe my fresh experience as an outsider entering the organization, and how I was introduced to the top management, the Executive Team, and the various departments. Then, I will describe how in the initial weeks I had the opportunities to interact with the Department Heads during management team meetings, team meetings, lunch time conversations, and individual interviews. In the third month of my study, I took part in the badminton game sponsored by the company for caring and staff relations. In the badminton game, I acted as a *participant* instead of just an observer. My regular participation in the badminton game gave me opportunities to interact with other levels of staff in an informal way. I will describe the 5-day *shadowing* experience with the two department heads, who had faced the most challenging integration of their departments, and their roles as a leader of the organizational change. Finally, I will conclude and process the eventual exit from the organization with the final individual interviews with the top management and the key participants for my ethnographic study.

My Arrival and Introduction

It was a sunny and hot day. I felt very excited, and I arrived very early in the morning just to make sure that I would not be late for the meeting with the Vice President and the HR Director of the RSX Shenzhen Site (RSX-SZ). The new plant facility is located at the western part of Shenzhen inside an industrial park. It occupies a four-story building. The building is relatively old, but it was renovated and built with new ventilation systems, fences, doors, and CCTV surveillance cameras around the building. The main entrance is a big iron door, and I could not see what was inside from afar. There were not many workers going in or out of the plant as I sat 30 meters away across the plant and observed before the meeting time.

At 8:30 a.m. I entered the iron gate and told security that I had a meeting with the HR Director. Security asked me to sit down at the reception area and wait for the HR officer to sign me in and escort me into the plant. While I was waiting, I saw a department head whom I coached two years ago came in (see Chapter III, Ethnographic Access, p. 80). He recognized me and greeted me with a warm handshake. Then, he went into the second gate. At that moment, the new Plant Director (PD), Joseph (I use fictitious names for the key personnel in writing the ethnography for easy reference), came in from the front entrance. I stood up and greeted him. He shook hands with me, and I congratulated him for his promotion. He smiled and welcomed me to the RSX-SZ site. He mentioned that he would join the meeting later together with the VP and the HR Director. Then, he went into the second gate.

After several minutes, the HR officer came to assist me to register and to get the security pass for my visit. The whole process was done electronically, but I needed to fill in the details of my identification card and other personal details. Moreover, they required me to scan my hand several times to create my augmented identity to get into the plant. The security finally gave me a pass to carry around my neck to show my identity. Then, I passed through the second gate, which could not be opened when the front gate is opened. The HR officer explained to me that they would not let any unwanted visitors or trespassers get into the plant by following someone from the front gate to the second gate (I did not quite understand such security measures and how come they were so specific about guarding against trespassers). Inside the second gate, there is the third gate, where I had to put my security pass on the detector to get through. The gate is designed to allow only one person to get through the gate. The HR officer finally led me to the second floor, the General Office. She had to teach me how to put my right hand on the scanner in front of the fourth gate to recognize my augmented identity. I was so afraid that somehow the scanner could not recognize my hand and some security alarm might be triggered. Fortunately, it worked, and the gate was opened; there was no alarm.

The General Office is very well decorated with different colors, warm lighting, and a very comfortable pantry and common area in the middle of the office. We arrived at the Vice President (VP) office, and I saw the VP, Alex (I use fictitious names for the key personnel in writing the ethnography for easy reference), come out from his desk to greet me. Later, the Plant Director (PD), Joseph, and the HR Director, Francis, came into the meeting room. I met all of them two years ago in my training and coaching assignments. Joseph was one of my coachees as he was the Operation Director then. Alex and Francis were my customers, but they also participated in the Leading Change workshop, which I conducted for 40 top executives and managers of the plant in 2018 to equip them for managing the relocation project. Since then, I had not seen them in the past two years. However, they greeted me in the meeting with a warm reception. I felt more relaxed and hopeful about the research study.

Alex asked me to brief Joseph and Francis about my research because he informed them about my coming and the research project only a few weeks ago when my arrival date was confirmed. After my presentation to Joseph and Francis about my research, Alex went on to brief me about the new plant, the organizational changes, particularly the integration of the teams, and some people management issues. He told me that Judy, the Quality Director, had taken on additional responsibilities as the Quality, Process, and Product Engineering Director. Moreover, David, the Operation Director, also had taken charge of the first-floor and the third-floor manufacturing operations, which were previously managed by Joseph before his promotion to the PD position. He further pointed out some customer complaints and people issues that he needed to manage. I was surprised by the fact that he was so open with me about those issues, which I thought were rather sensitive. Apparently, Alex had trusted me as their consultant and coach (not just as a research student), and he had received this outsider as an insider because of the prior professional relationship with the organization.

After my meeting with the VP, Joseph was very courteous to me. He personally took me to the cubicle and made sure that I had everything I needed before he left me at my workstation. He was very kind to provide a manager cubicle for me, where I was sitting next to all the department heads (DHs). While I was settling down at the cubicle, I looked around to see the other staff working just across the open area. The general office was well designed and decorated with colorful walls, plants, a comfortable sitting area in the common area, and many meeting rooms. All of the department heads' cubicles, including mine, were open door offices (there were no doors). Some staff were wearing long blue or white coats (like those worn by doctors except that the material looked like plastic) whereas the other staff, e.g., finance and HR staff, wore normal casual clothes.

I could hear the noise generated from some kind of impact machines on the third floor. When I passed by the first floor in the morning, I saw the huge printing machines on the other side of the glass wall which separated the corridor and the shop floor. I was wondering what those impact machines were like and why they had created such nuisance to the staff working around the area (including me because I am very sensitive to noise). Management had tolerated such noisy working environment for those teams working underneath the impact machines.

At 11:30 a.m., I walked to the meeting room where they were going to hold the daily management team briefing. I walked by the other DH's cubicles and met some of those familiar DHs whom I had coached before. They gave me a very warm welcome; they told me that the PD had told them about my coming. We walked to the conference room together. The PD facilitated the meeting and jumped right into the operational issues. Each DH reported briefly about the major issues and some important metrics of their business and operations. The meeting lasted for around 35 minutes. At the end of the meeting, the PD introduced me to the DHs and other managers who were attending the meeting. With his permission I gave a brief introduction about my research project with the PowerPoint presentation. I used the script approved by the IRB to introduce my research project to the DHs (see Appendix B). The PD and the DHs did not ask any questions, probably because it was lunch time. Finally, I distributed the Informed Consent Form to the management team for them to review and sign if they should agree to participate in my study. They could return the form to me individually later. After the meeting, those DHs who had known me greeted me. The others whom I met for the first time also politely introduced themselves to me.

Interesting to me, it was the CFO-North Asia who first submitted the Informed Consent Form to me right away after lunch. I should note that I did not know the CFO before that meeting, and she was not one of the eight department heads whom I had coached before. I had the impression that CFOs were usually more cautious and aloof because they were the ones to control and manage the finance of the company, and they were more inhibited to disclose themselves. Coincidentally, the other managers whom I only met for the first time at the meeting, submitted their consent forms on the same day or the following day. It took me about two weeks to collect the Informed Consent Forms from the other DHs with whom I was familiar. I was kind of anxious whether they were willing to participate in my study. Finally, I managed to get the PD, all the DHs, and a few N-2 managers' consent forms. I was very grateful to their trust and support of my ethnographic study.

The ethnographic access to the organization determined the ethnographic immersion, especially in the introduction stage. The prior knowledge and relationship with the VP, the PD, and the management team gave me a relatively easy entry into the organization, as well as warm reception from the target participants. However, I knew that I needed to gain the trust of the other DHs and the other levels of staff, whom I had not known before. Moreover, I needed to define the ethnographic relationship carefully with the participants, lest they became confused about my role as a researcher. After all, being coached by Eric Kung is one thing and being studied by Eric Kung is a totally different matter; it required even a greater level of trust from the participants. I visited the plant two days per week usually on Monday and Wednesday, but sometimes I adjusted my schedule to accommodate to the meeting schedules and staff activities. That marked the beginning of my ethnographic dive at RSX-SZ.

Gaining Entries Into the Organization and Teams

In the first two months I tried to gain every opportunity to attend the management team meetings, the department team meetings, and the monthly all managers communication meeting. It is like the scuba diver swimming around at the surface level of the ocean, trying to see what is down there before he begins his descent. In the first month I focused on observing and understanding RSX-SZ as an organization. I attended their regular management team meeting on Monday morning. In March and early April, I managed to sit in most of the Team Meetings of the DHs with their N-2 and N-3 team members. At the team meetings, it was the DHs and the N-2 and N-3 middle managers and supervisors gathering to review progress, problems, and plans. Most of those meetings were highly technical and I had a hard time understanding what they were talking about. It was like they were speaking in a different language. The daily management team briefing, and the department team briefings seemed to be the most important platforms where the DHs interacted with the PD, the other DHs, and their respective N-2 and N-3 team members. In the next sections I will describe those interactions and dialogues in more detail.

Management Team Briefing. The management team meeting was held at 11:30 a.m. every day. The PD usually sat at the head of the table. The DHs and the other managers randomly took any seats available. Joseph was always on time, and he started the meeting on time regardless of whether some DHs had arrived yet or not. The briefing took the format of very brief reporting by the DHs or managers, with specific presentation of key performance indicators (KPIs) related to their departments. Different from the other team meetings, the management team meeting did not use PowerPoint presentation; instead, they just mentioned the data and the PD wrote down those data on his notebook. It seemed as though everyone carried a notebook to record all the key data and points to follow up in the notebook. Some notebooks had letterheads and printed formats for different departments and roles. Each DH reported their KPIs and major issues within three minutes. It seemed like everyone understood that the management team meeting should be brief, concise, and precise. There were very little interactions among the DHs apart from some short exchange and questions. At the later stage of my study, I found out that in the past, usually it was Alex who asked the DHs questions during the management team briefing, and that the DHs could be very stressed by those questions from the ex-PD. Some DHs had mentioned to me that Joseph's style had been very mild, and they could feel more relaxed during the briefings. At the end of the meeting, the PD concluded with his comments and his highlights of some key issues about the business. The management team meeting could last for as short as 25 minutes to as long as 45 minutes. In the past it could take as long as 90 minutes, and they could not have lunch until 1:00 p.m.

Department Team Meetings. In the department team meetings, I began to understand the focus and operational issues of the teams as well as the leadership styles of the DHs and the general atmosphere of the teams. Some DHs just let the managers and supervisors report on their KPIs and key issues to the teams, whereas the other DHs might do a one-way communication to the teams about some business and department issues. At the end of the team meetings, with the permission of the DHs, I gave an introduction to my role and my research study as well as explained to them the three main principles of engagement (voluntary participation, confidentiality, and option to withdraw at any time). I had learned that the norm of presentation at RSX-SZ was brief, brief, and brief. I could not possibly cover all the points as IRB requires me to say in the script.

Touring the Shop Floors. At the end of the first month, I asked the Operation Director, David, to take me for a tour around their shop floors of the fourth, third, and first floors to understand their production processes and meet some of those managers, engineers, designers, technicians, and operators. To enter the shop floors, I needed to apply for a high security pass from the PD and the HR Director. Moreover, I needed to wear protective clothing including a long blue coat, white ninja hat, and blue shoe-covers as shown in Figure 4.2. I was so embarrassed that the shoe covers were too small for my hiking boots and that David had to help me fix the covers. I thought that David was very kind to assist me, and it was good leadership practice. The shop floor of the fourth floor is a dust-free area and before

Figure 4.2

Researcher in Protective Clothes

we went into the area, we had to be deionized by a machine blowing air to our clothes. Then, we needed to pass through a gate which specifically is used to ensure single person entrance, lest someone is hiding under the feet to get into the highly secured production area. David explained to me that their products contain personal and financial data, which is highly confidential and private, and that any loss or theft of those products could mean great damage to their company's reputation and even financial loss.

David was very patient and thorough in explaining to me about the products, production processes, and the functions of those machines. I had to confess that I did not quite understand some of the things that he was trying to explain to me because they were highly technical. It was only in the later months that I slowly picked up and understood some of those processes and technical problems. Moreover, I began to understand what those KPIs meant (I actually asked the DHs about those terms). I was learning their language.

The three floors had different production lines and functions. The fourth floor was the high-tech production, and most of the technicians and engineers there were highly skilled staff with professional knowledge and skills to operate on those sophisticated machines and testing equipment. There were around 30 people working in the office area and less than 10 in the shop floor. It looked like a medical laboratory except that it did not have that antiseptic liquid smell typical of hospitals and medical premises.

The third floor consisted of many small assembly lines which put together different components of the products and conduct quality assurance tests. Here they embedded together all the components of the products, ensured quality, and packed them for delivery. It was the biggest operation with over 300 staff working in shifts on the different machines. All the operators and engineers were wearing blue coats, but they did not need to wear ninja hats or shoe covers, though I noticed that most of them were wearing special shoes. The operation people were wearing blue coats, whereas the quality people were wearing white coats with stripes on their shoulders with different colors. It seemed that most of the quality people were female, and the operators were male. Compared with the fourth floor, the third floor was noisier. David finally showed me the punching machines which caused the nuisance to the second floor teams. He explained to me that the Continuous Improvement Team and the Operation Manager were looking into some solutions to prevent or reduce the noise.

The first floor had the huge printing machines, which were as long as a badminton court, with the semiskilled male workers wearing the mechanic uniforms operating the machines. David told me that those printing machines cost millions of dollars and they had to lease the equipment instead of purchasing them, because they were so expensive. He showed me the first digital printing machine that they had recently acquired. The printing shop floor was absolutely noisy, filled with all kinds of music (generated from the machines as some kinds of signaling). It was also filled with the smell of the paints. On the ceiling there were automatic sprinklers spraying mists to create moisture in the air. At the other end of the floor there was an office area where the graphic designers were working on the designs of their products. There were about 20 designers working in the graphic design unit.

During the tour, David introduced me to some of the managers whom he directly supervised. Some of them recognized me because they joined the people management training that I conducted two years ago. I met some of them earlier at the team meetings. It was a totally different experience to see them in action at the shop floors rather than observing them at the meetings, where they mainly reported about data and presented about some technical problems to the teams. The managers and supervisors were discussing with the technicians about some products or technical problems, holding the prints or the products in their hands. One manager saw the driving belt of one of the machines was off track; he helped the operator who was busy fixing another problem reset the belt on the track. The managers gave me a very warm welcome, and David asked some managers to explain to me the process and they gladly did so with enthusiasm, as if they were showing me their artwork.

The plant tour was a good conclusion of the introduction stage of my ethnography journey. It helped me understand their production processes and some technical problems that had been mentioned at the management team meetings and team meetings. Most importantly, it was the first time that I got to meet all levels of their employees, though I did not meet all of them (they had night shifts).

Diving In and Focusing on the Big Five Plus One (B5+1)

After the initial observations and gaining understanding of the organization structure and changes in RSX-SZ, I realized that the main business processes and operations were happening in the five production departments and the rest are more supportive of the other functions. I called those five key DHs the *Big Five* because they represent the five biggest and most important operations of RSX-SZ: (a) supply chain, (b) preproduction, (c) operation, (d) quality, process, and product engineering, and (e) EHS, security, and audit). I did not have much chance to interact with the N-2 managers except the few who attended the weekly management team meeting. Moreover, the N-2 managers are not directly involved in the strategic decisions of the plant; they are involved in the day-to-day operations and tasks in their respective departments. I reckoned that I should focus on the DHs instead of trying to cover both N-1 and N-2 for my study.

One important unexpected change which happened prior to the start of my ethnographic engagement was the promotion of Alex, the original PD to the VP-Global Manufacturing position in September 2020. Joseph was promoted as PD in October 2020. The Big Five departments were impacted by the integration and the reorganization brought about by the promotion of the two senior executives, particularly the Operations Department and the Quality, Process and Product Engineering Department. Moreover, since the Finance department had experienced very high staff turnover after the Chinese New Year (10 out of 18 staff had resigned within a few weeks), the CFO-North Asia and the Finance Director had to manage those personnel changes. Apart from relocation and integration of the three sites, now leadership transition and the subsequent organizational changes had also become key issues of this ethnographic study. I decided to focus on the Big

Five plus One in the latter months of my ethnography.

The Big Five usually ate together at lunch time at the nearby cafeteria. Occasionally the CFO-North Asia joined them at lunch. Apart from the management team meetings and team meetings, I could only interact with the DHs mainly during the lunch hour through table, walk, and tea-time conversations. It was at lunch time that the DHs could talk about anything under the sun from some interesting stories at work, celebrities, health, sports, food, or other things in their family and personal lives. I observed a very high level of trust and friendship among the Big Five plus the CFO because some of their conversations were very personal such as marital issues, children's education, cross-cultural exchange between Europeans and Chinese, bribery in business, views about religion and politics. Later, I realized that most of them had worked together for over 15–20 years. The freshest one was the Supply Chain Director, Mary, who joined the company eight years ago.

At lunch I participated in the conversation as a part of the group instead of just observing. They welcomed me to join them, and we could talk and laugh together during lunch conversations. In the Chinese culture and professional culture, dining with someone and having tea together with him regularly means acceptance and trust. I felt privileged to have gained their trust as their friend, even as an outsider whom they had hardly known much (compared to their 15–20 years of friendship). Ethnographic immersion has to enter into the core of the culture or social relationships of the community or organization, so that the ethnographer can observe and experience those cultural and relational elements firsthand. Familiarity and friendship at table conversions or teatime allowed me to see the other sides of the participants, which they might not reveal in the office or at work. My next level of immersion was the other staff (N-2 and below) whom I could hardly see or interact with apart from formal meetings. How could I become familiar with them and engage them in meaningful conversations?

Familiarizing Other Staff in Different Reefs

At the RSX-SZ site I interacted mostly with the DHs; I could only see the N-2 managers and other team members (N-3 or N-4) at their team meetings and other staff functions. It was impossible to talk to them during working hours because they were all involved in their respective work, not to mention that shop floors required the high security pass to get in and I only had general pass for visitors. I had wanted to interact with those staff as much as I could because, eventually, I asked them about leadership-as-practice of their DHs. I was looking for other reefs, where I could meet and interact with them.

The new PD was trying to create a trusted and caring organizational culture at RSX-SZ. One of the ways he did this was to organize many sports clubs so that the staff could play together. In May, I joined the Tuesday evening badminton games organized by the Badminton Club, where I could play badminton with the team members and get to know some of them. I had the opportunities of talking with them while we were waiting for our turn to play. In the first game I got to know three general staff of the Operation department and one new staff who just joined the Finance department. It was the first time that I actually participated in the group instead of just being an observer.

I joined the Tuesday night badminton game as long as I was not traveling elsewhere. So, the regular players began to notice me and to play with me as partners or opponents in matches. I usually play tennis for my regular sports, though I could play badminton at novice level. It took me a while to adjust to the game and to pick up my rusty skills. After several games, I improved and played better. The group seemed to enjoy playing with me more. By mid-June, when I began the shadowing exercise with the two DHs, I met some of those badminton players whom I only got to see on Tuesday night games. We smiled at each other, and they seemed to feel comfortable with me being around observing the DHs and their interactions with team members.

Attending the management team meetings, departmental team meetings, and one-on-one supervision meetings could only allow me to observe their interactions in those meeting settings. Moreover, team meetings were only one of the many meetings that they had in the organization. Participating in lunch conversations with the DHs and in badminton games could allow me to understand the DHs and other general staff at a superficial level. At best, I was only able to take a snapshot of the many interactions and conversations that happened during the day of the DHs. I knew that I needed to engage the DHs to understand their perspectives and experiences of organizational change and the leading change processes, through individual interviews or conversations. Moreover, I needed to observe more deeply and at a longer period, the leadership-as-practice of the DHs through shadowing exercise with two selected DHs.

Chasing the Fishes by Individual Interviews With the PD, DHs, and VP

In April and May, I conducted the first individual interviews with the PD, the Big Five, the CFO-North Asia, and the Finance Director. I also had some less formal individual conversations with those supportive DHs and a few managers (N-2). The first interview was mainly designed to get to know their work history with the organization, the main organizational changes that they had experienced and managed in the past 12 months, the challenges they had encountered thus far and expected in the near future, how they had coped with or managed those changes, and most importantly, their plans or thoughts to face future challenges.

I could do audio recording with the PD and two of the DHs during the interviews. Those important conversations, captured verbatim, gave me solid data for further and deeper analysis of their organizational changes, their thoughts, and to some extent what they reported their leadership practices to be. For other DHs, I wrote my interview notes at once or shortly after the interviews. Their levels of trust and disclosure surprised me, and again, I was deeply grateful to them. Two of the DHs who were relatively cautious in their coaching relationship with me two years ago could also open to me about their deep thoughts and feelings concerning the organizational changes and their personal career issues. I felt that after the first interviews, my relationships with the PD and the DHs had gone deeper.

The PD, Joseph, was always prepared for coaching sessions when I did leadership coaching with him two years ago. Before the first interview, I told him about the purpose of the interview and the key questions that I would discuss with him. At the first interview Joseph was very ready to share with me his experience of change management in the organization as well as his career development. He was definitely under intense pressure to excel and perform as the new PD as well as to work with the VP and the management team to drive and sustain the business in a highly VUCA business environment. Leadership transition and people management were two of his biggest challenges because he felt he had many things to learn about leadership and people management, while he could pretty well manage those operational and technical issues at the RSX-SZ site (he was operation director).

A few of the DHs told me about their initial struggles after the reorganization of the departments. Gaining the acceptance, trust, and respect from the new teams, which were integrated into their departments, was very challenging to them. Since they were not familiar with those new production lines or the work nature of the new teams, they needed to work very hard and learn very fast to catch up. On the other hand, the pressure from the top management to drive performance and productivity brought about great stress for the DHs.

Almost all the departments had experienced some kind of staff turnover problems. The DHs could not control the compensation and reward policies or the budgets of their departments; they found themselves totally helpless in staff retention and staff engagement. Some of the DHs also shared with me about their career development cross-roads at different stages of their career at RSX-SZ as well as their disappointments and frustrations in some setbacks in recent months. They were willing to show me their other sides, which they did not normally show or tell the others at work.

I had deliberately delayed my interview with the VP until I had finished all the team meetings and interviews with the PD and DHs. First of all, I needed to understand the organization, the integration issues, the PD, and the DHs better before I could talk to the VP who could ask me very direct questions about my study. Secondly, I knew that I could only talk to the VP once or twice during the whole six-month ethnographic study because he was remarkably busy handling the global business and crisis brought about by the Delta COVID virus in India and other countries. Lastly, I needed to know what specific questions I should ask him to understand the macro and meso levels of the organization.

I extended the invitation to interview the VP in early June, but he did not reply. Then, in the next week, he suddenly showed up at my cubicle at 10:30 a.m. and asked me if I could talk to him then. I responded that, of course, I would love to. I had a 35-minute conversation with him because he told me that he had a meeting at 11 a.m. It was not a structured interview because I only had 30 minutes and I only could ask him a very general question about change to start the interview. Then, the VP started talking freely about the global business, the RSX-SZ organizational changes, the people management issues, and his impressions about some DHs and managers. It was the first time that I heard from the VP about his perceptions of the DHs. That helped me to understand the interactions and dialogues between the VP, the PD, and the DHs in the context of leadership transition and organizational change. The ethnographic puzzle seemed to come into place with more information revealed by the VP from macro and meso levels.

Being the Invisible Observer Through Shadowing Two Department Heads

When I was about half-way through my ethnography, I realized that I needed to go to a deeper level of immersion so that I could observe the direct interactions of the DHs with their significant others in the organization, to see their leadership-as-practice in action. I proposed to have a 5-day shadowing exercise with two DHs who were most affected by the integration and reorganization. The plan was to shadow (follow and accompany) the DHs during the office hours, to see and experience what they actually did in the five different workdays of the week (Monday to Friday). Then, I could gain a better view of their normal work week and their interactions with different parties throughout those five days. That could be the only opportunity for me to totally immerse into the operation and production processes of the organization. Hopefully, I could see their leadership-as-practice in the shadowing process.

I made the request to the two DHs and explained the purpose, the process, and even some possible benefits to them (one of them asked me what she could get out of the exercise). Both of my target DHs agreed to do the shadowing in mid-June to mid-July. Then, I sounded out the idea to the VP during my conversation with him and he did not object (I did not ask for his permission; I only mentioned to him that I was going to do the shadowing exercise without any specific details). In my second interview with the PD, I officially asked for his approval, and he gladly approved the exercise. With the PD's approval, I could get the high security pass to get into the shop floors in those five to six weeks. In those five days of shadowing, I had the opportunity to observe the interactions and dialogues of the two DHs with their superiors, their peers, and their respective team members as a group as well as individually. The only interaction that I did not get to observe was their communication meetings with the corporate office.

Shadowing the Operation Director. On June 15 I started the first shadowing exercise with David, the Operation Director. His daily routine was to have briefing meetings with all the operation teams in the three different floors. David and I got dressed up with those protective clothes and shoe covers on the fourth floor. The briefing with the seven high-tech production leaders was carried out at a meeting corner in the shop floor. They gathered standing up, around a small, tall roundtable surrounded by many dashboards with charts and figures printed on the displace folders. David greeted his team and briefly explained that I was accompanying him these days for observation. I nodded my head to greet them and then stood behind, outside the circle. Each team leader took turns to present some technical issues, which they wanted to inform David and the team. They briefly discussed the issues and made some quick decisions about the matter. There were operation, process, and quality people in the briefing meeting. I reckoned that they always used a multidisciplinary approach to tackle technical problems. They always kept the meeting to 30 minutes (because they arranged meetings at the 1st or 30th minute of the hour).

David then led me to the first floor. On our way there, he was explaining to me that the PD, Joseph, could be leading the briefing meetings on the first floor and the third floor because they were still in the leadership transition. Joseph used to look after those two floors, while David was in charge of the operations on the fourth floor. After Joseph's promotion, the three operations were integrated under David's supervision. However, the technology and the operations of those two floors were altogether different from the high-tech operation that David was responsible for. Therefore, from October 2020 until June 2021, Joseph was still involved in the briefing and operational issues so that they could allow David to have sufficient time to pick up the operations and ensure business continuity. Occasionally, Joseph might not show up at the briefing meetings; David took the lead whenever Joseph was not present. Such overlap of roles during leadership transition seemed to be a practice adapted by both Alex and Joseph in the organizational change. I will discuss more about that in the next chapter.

Ten people were waiting, and they had started their discussion on some technical issues concerning some printing products. Joseph was not at the meeting and, thus, David, took over the meeting and asked the leaders to report. The place was very noisy, and I could hardly hear what they were talking about. During the meeting I noticed that Joseph was on the first floor, and he was talking with a line supervisor five meters behind the dashboards, but David and the rest of the team did not realize that. Joseph did not join in the briefing; he left shortly after he finished the conversation with the supervisor. I guessed that Joseph probably wanted to let David take the lead to brief the printing team on the first day of my shadowing. I remembered Joseph telling me about Alex's (the VP's) involvement in the operation briefing and the management team meeting in the initial months of the leadership transition, and that Alex eventually let him take the lead without attending those meetings anymore. I thought that Joseph was doing the same with David for leadership transition. Letting the new leader be and letting go of the old team that the leader used to lead, at the right timing, could be a very important leadership practice in leadership transition management.

At 10:30 a.m., David and I arrived at the briefing meeting on the third floor. Joseph was there, together with 10 operation managers and engineers, and he had already started the briefing (Joseph always started meetings on time). They were discussing about some technical problems in a product. David was standing next to Joseph, listening and taking notes on his operation notebook. After all the operation managers and supervisors reported about their problems, Joseph made some general remarks about the market situation and the coming production schedules. Finally, he reminded the team leaders to take their annual leaves, lest their outstanding leave could be written off by July 1.

At 11:30 a.m., David and I attended the management team meeting. After lunch at 2:00 p.m., David had one-on-one supervision with his operation manager on the fourth floor and with an operation engineer on the third floor. Both meetings were about some technical problems with the production lines or certain products. At 3:00 p.m., David rushed to the HR meeting where the PD and the DHs were present to discuss about recruitment, training, and other HR issues. I got to meet with the new HR manager after the meeting, whom I did not usually see at the management team meeting at 11:30 a.m.

At 4:00 p.m., David went to the first floor to meet with the Graphic Manager to review some operations and processes. They also looked at the organization chart and manpower issues, including the career development paths of the team and promotion recommendations. David mainly listened to the manager's report and comments. He asked a few questions in a very gentle way to clarify some issues.

At 5:00 p.m., David had a meeting with a process engineer to review a certain process improvement project. Productivity and performance improvement was the prime purpose of the improvement project. David reminded the engineer that any recommendation had to be evidence-based and data-driven. They also needed to assess the risks of the different approaches. If the project was successful, they could shorten the “order to production” waiting time. David showed his appreciation to the engineer’s effort and progress.

Shadowing the Quality, Process, and Product (QPP) Director. On June 16, I started the first shadowing exercise with Judy, the QPP Director. Unlike David, Judy started her day later in the morning because she usually worked very late after the normal office hours because of the teleconference with Europe corporate office, which is six hours behind. She had her daily briefing at 11:00 a.m. with the QPP engineering team at the conference room on the third floor. There was a big and tall rectangular table. Judy had the meeting with four process engineering managers. She briefly introduced me to the team, and I recognized that one of them was the organizer of the badminton club. He and I looked at each other and smiled. Another process engineer was also playing badminton the other night when I got to know his name, but I did not know that he was working in Judy’s process engineering team.

Like other briefing meetings, the QPP engineering team meeting was talking about highly technical issues concerning certain processes and products. I knew that the engineering team used to report to the ex-Operation Director, Joseph, and that Judy did not have the engineering background to be able to solve their technical problems, but she was familiar with processes and products after many years of working in the Quality department. According to what Joseph and Judy told me in the individual interviews, during the initial months of the reorganization and integration, the engineering team did not accept the organizational change and they doubted whether Judy was able to lead and manage their engineering tasks and projects. It was the first time that I could observe how Judy interacted with the QPP engineering team leaders.

The QPP engineering team were all male engineers around 30–40 years of age. They looked rather formal and sober at the start of the meeting. When Judy had engaged the team in some discussions about some technical matters and projects, I noticed that she was quite relaxed and smiled with the team. The rest of the team were also smiling while they were discussing on some issues. The atmosphere of the team meeting was quite relaxed and productive to my surprise. In the subsequent shadowing exercise on the other days, the same interaction pattern was observed.

In the individual interview, Judy told me about her frustrations in dealing with the engineering team because they did not seem to respect her, and they often went directly to the PD or even the VP to solve those technical problems. Joseph also told me about the objections of the engineering team to Judy's leadership over their team, partly because of her lack of engineering qualification, and partly because of her management style. He had tried to mediate the new working relationship between Judy and the engineering team through personal coaching with some of the team leaders. So, after the shadowing exercise, I thought that perhaps Judy had gained their acceptance (if not respect and trust) as their leader, though she might not have all the technical knowledge and expertise that they expected their leader to have. In the next chapter, I will explore further Judy’s leadership practices in dealing with such difficult team dynamics during the organizational change.

During the immersion, I realized that the department heads, the managers, and other staffs recognized me as their teacher rather than a research student. The previous training and coaching experience two years ago had given me an easy access to the organization, as well as recognition and trust from the department heads and the managers. I came to accept that fact but, in the meantime, I knew that I had to be careful about the boundary issues so that they did not misunderstand my intention and my role as researcher instead of their teacher or coach. I will discuss more about the boundary issue in the last section.

Defining the Boundaries as a Researcher

To set the boundary as a researcher, whenever I sensed that the DHs or managers began to seek for my coaching about some issues, I immediately stated the purpose of my study and the importance of staying neutral and impartial as a researcher. I recommended them for coaching service from other coaches. To conclude the ethnographic immersion chapter, I will tell the story of the lunch celebration gathering of the Operation department.

On June 30, it was the end of the H1 (first half of the year). The Operation Director, David, was hosting a lunch with the PD, all the managers and supervisors of the Operation department (all the three floors) to celebrate the good results and performance of the team.

David invited me to join with them (we were in the shadowing exercise on that day, but usually I was not invited in those lunch meetings).

Joseph, David, and I were walking together under the hot weather to the restaurant. When we arrived, the whole group had already been present, and the second table had started their lunch. Joseph, David, and I went to the head table. I was waiting to be seated because in Chinese culture the seating at the head table had specific meaning, depending on the status of the person to be seated. The norm is that the host sits in the middle of the head table. The most respected guest would sit at the left-hand side of the host. In that occasion, David was the host because he was the DH of Operation department. Joseph just went ahead to sit on the side. David asked me to sit on the left-hand side beside him. I was honored and grateful for their respect and recognition.

I was struggling whether I should include this tale in this chapter because I was not being invisible or behind the scenes as an ethnographer ought to be. Nevertheless, I included this part as the conclusion of the immersion chapter because I reckoned that my relationship with the organization played a significant part in the immersion process. Denying that or deliberately down-playing the impact of that relationship would not do justice to this research and the readers. The whole organization, from top management to shop floor workers, did not see me just as a student or researcher, though they knew that I was doing research on leadership at the plant; they recognized me as a teacher or a consultant who had taught and coached some of their DHs and managers two years ago, and who was highly regarded by the VP. I was being included at management team meeting, lunch conversations with the DHs, individual interviews, shadowing exercises, and even the celebration lunch, largely because of that relationship. Without that prior relationship I did not think that this ethnographic study could happen at all! As a researcher and ethnographer, I was humble enough not to assert the roles of teacher or consultant or to abuse the trust of those top leaders, DHs, and managers during my research. Making truthful analysis of the data I collected during the immersion about leadership-as-practice and contributing the research findings to new knowledge and perhaps their future leadership development, could be the only way for me to show my gratitude to the organization.

Conclusion

The progressive approach of immersion, from introduction and team observation to individual interview, and finally shadowing exercise, worked very effectively in allowing me to understand the organization, teams, and interactions of the DHs with the significant others in the RSX-SZ site. The leadership-as-practice of the DHs could be as normal as the routine briefing meetings and problem solving of the technical issues in the shop floor. It could also be a fast swimming fish just passing by the diver (ethnographer). He needed to turn and focus on the moving fish to catch what was going on with the DHs and the concerned people around. In the next chapter I will address to those leadership-as-practice behaviors and moments identified during my ethnographic presence with the DHs, the teams, and the organization.

CHAPTER V: LEADERSHIP-AS-PRACTICE OF THE MIDDLE MANAGERS

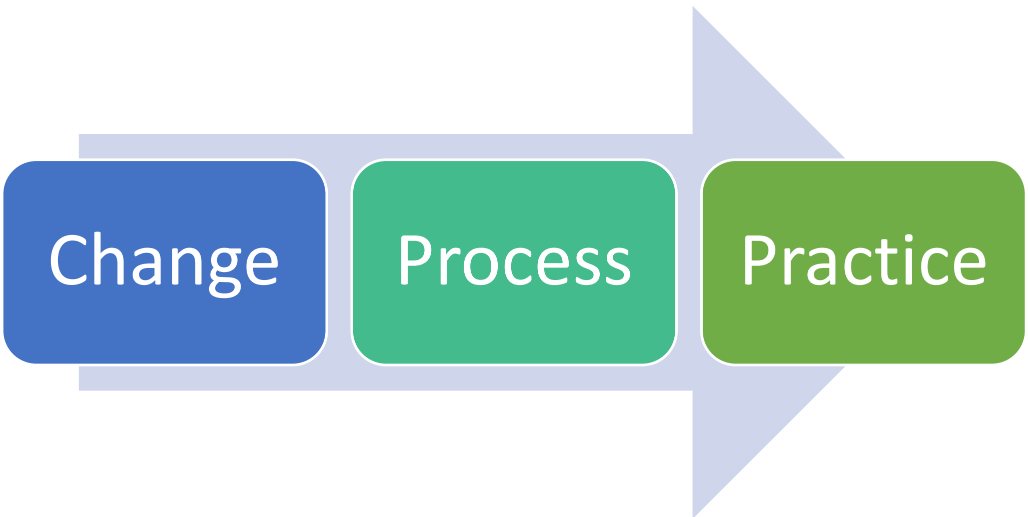
Leadership-as-practice within the MNC context during organizational changes in the Asia Pacific cultural environment is the main focus of my ethnographic study. This study has drawn from literature reviews of three theoretical frameworks namely collective leadership, change management theories, and leadership-as-practice theories of MMs, and related empirical findings. It applied organizational ethnography as a methodology to explore the actual leadership practices of MMs at the research site, RSX-SZ, which was a European MNC operating within the Asia Pacific setting during organizational change. This chapter will address the following research questions of my study:

- What are the interactions or dialogues between MMs and the top management, peer managers, and external stakeholders?
- What are the team interactions or dialogues between MMs and team members during organizational changes?
- What are the thoughts, plans, and actions that MMs have and do during organizational change?

To achieve that aim I will first discuss the findings of my organizational ethnography based on the six-month observation, interviews, and research of related documents about RSX-SZ. I will address the three research questions about the interactions and dialogues of the MMs with their stakeholders, top management, peer managers, and team members, in the processes of organizational change, leadership change, and personnel change. I will also describe and analyze the thoughts, plans, and actions of the MMs during those processes of change. Finally, I will draw from the ethnographic data and analyze the main leadership practices that I observed among the MMs during the processes of change over the six months of time in my ethnographic immersion in the organization (Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1

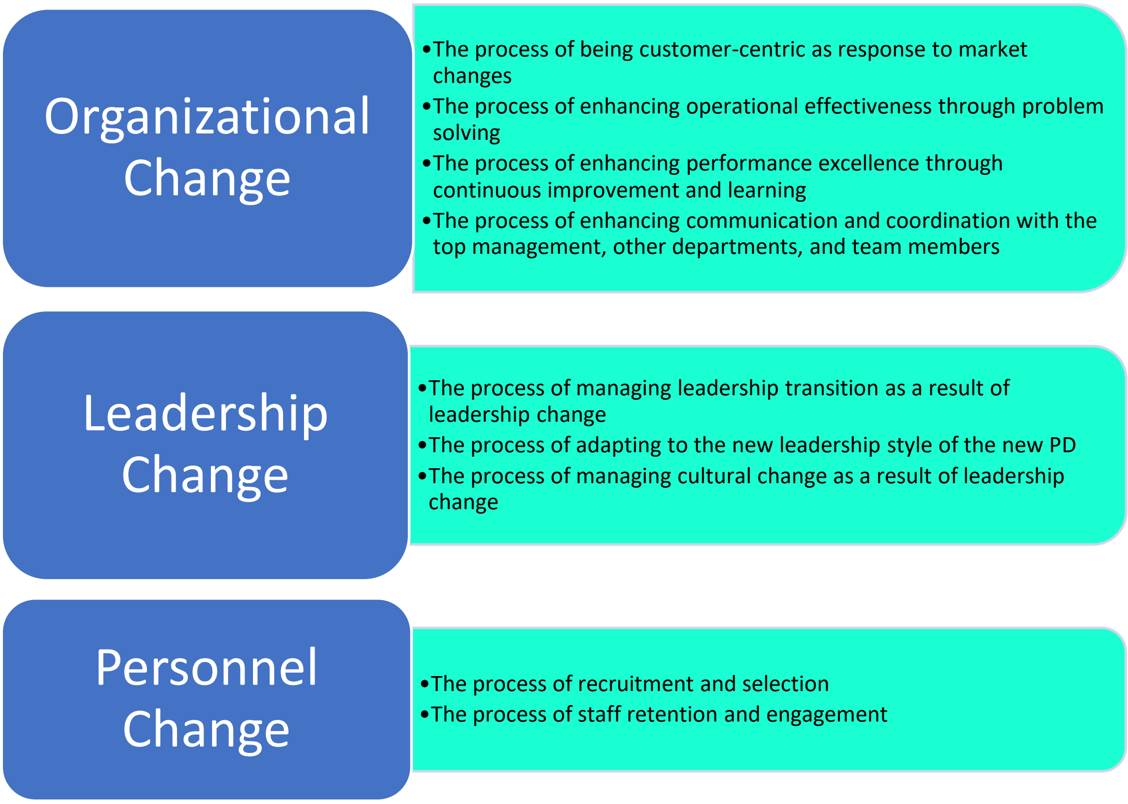
Analysis of Ethnographic Data



The leadership practices of MMs should be understood within the contexts of the changes that had occurred within the organization during the ethnographic study. Three major changes were identified at the macro and meso levels which were occurring at the research site (that is, organizational change, leadership change, and personnel change). I will trace through the various processes that were experienced and involved by the MMs during those changes—organizational change, leadership change, and personnel change (Figure 5.2). As summarized in Figure 5.2, the changes in the organization could bring about the processes that the top management and the MMs as proactive responses or reactive measures.

Figure 5.2

Changes and the Processes of Leading Change



In organizational change, the MMs were engaged in the processes of being customer centric, enhancing operational effectiveness through problem solving, enhancing performance excellence through continuous improvement and learning, and enhancing communication and coordination with top management, other departments and team members. In leadership change, there were the processes of managing leadership transition, adapting to the new leadership style of the PD, and managing cultural change brought about by leadership change. Finally, to deal with the personnel change at the lower levels, the MMs were involved in the processes of recruitment and selection, and staff retention and engagement.

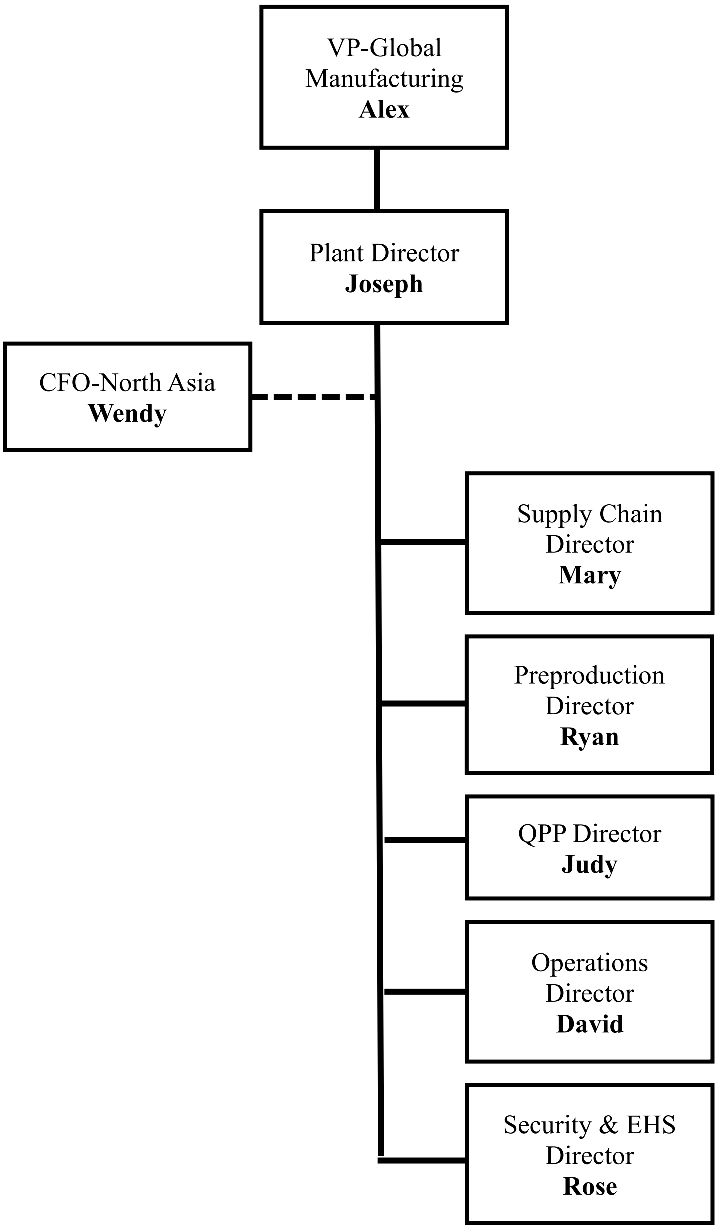
Each of those changes engaged leadership processes that I will seek to articulate and categorize the main leadership practices applied by the MMs in managing those changes in the later section of this chapter. To help the identification of those main leadership practices and subpractices in the analysis, I will use italics to highlight those terms when they first appear in the analysis.

Lastly, to answer the third research question more specifically, I will point out, at the individual level, how continuous improvement and learning as a personal value could affect the MMs' leadership practice. Moreover, the particular social support network among the key MMs could sustain their coping and management of the challenges during organizational change.

To recap the organizational structure of RSX-SZ and to ease the reading of the following data analysis, I put together a simplified organization chart (Figure 5.3) for better understanding about the top management and the B5+1 interactions in the subsequent sections. In Figure 5.3 all the names of the characters are fictitious, but their roles are real. The top management consists of the VP and the PD. The Big 5 are the five department heads namely Mary, Ryan, Judy, David, and Rose. Plus one is the CFO-North Asia, Wendy, who does not report to the PD directly (dotted line accountability).

Figure 5.3

The Top Management and the Big5+1 Relationships

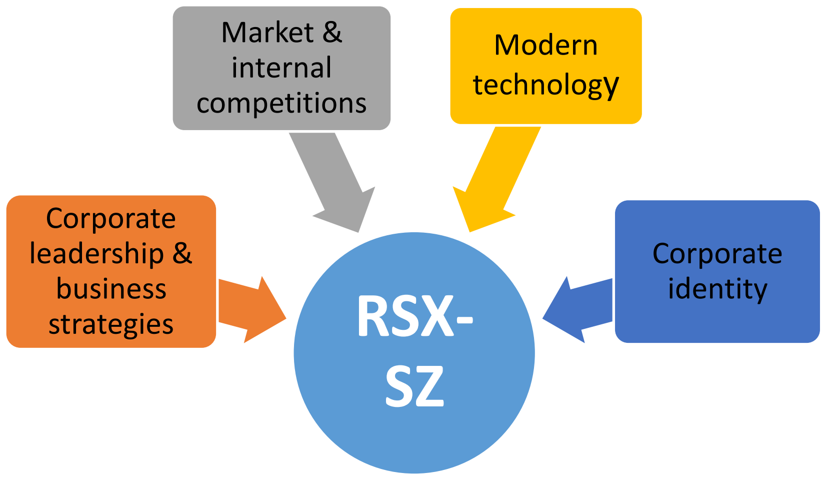


Organizational Changes at Macro and Meso Levels

Leadership-as-practice has its organizational, cultural, and social contexts. Organizational changes of MNCs at the corporate level could bring about waves of changes across the company. Some of those changes were well planned, communicated, and executed, whereas other changes were totally unexpected (Figure 5.4). They came in the form of a crisis that hit the organization in the middle of the night, with no warning signs or alarms, just like the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-China trade wars. In Figure 5.4, the four major changes or crisis are represented as: corporate leadership and business strategies, market and internal competitions, modern technology, and corporate identity.

Figure 5.4

Historical and Organizational Contexts of RSX-SZ



Corporate Leadership and Business Strategies

In June 2020, a new CEO and a new division head related to RSX-SZ's business units were appointed. The corporate leadership change subsequently brought about the changes in the upper middle levels. It was under this context that Alex Smith (the fictitious name) was promoted to the VP-Global Manufacturing position in September 2020, and Joseph Chen (the fictitious name) for was promoted as the new Plant Director (PD) in October 2020.

Market and Internal Competitions

According to a DH, though RSX-SZ is located in China, the company had not been able to penetrate into the local markets for various reasons (local competition and intellectual property consideration). As a result, the SZ site has depended very much on Europe, Middle East, and USA markets for revenue generation. The US-China trade wars and US bans on supplying high-technology products to China have directly impacted their business as well as their supply of semiconductors. In the past two years, RSX-SZ lost all their US-based customers. Fortunately, they had somehow managed the downtime in 2019–2020, and they were still able to generate good business results and some profit margins. Moreover, RSX-SZ had gained new momentum after the relocation because the COVID-19 pandemic had brought to them new business opportunities. Other RSX manufacturing sites had been impacted by COVID-19, whereas SZ Site could still operate at its highest efficiency.

The SZ Site was only the manufacturing operation for RSX in the APAC region, without any local market shares or revenues. According to some DHs, in view of the transportation costs and other political factors (that is, to avoid USA-China trade war), the company might consider moving its operations to other more stable and less costly locations if RSX-SZ loses its competitive edge. The RSX-SZ's counterpart in India had grown rapidly and they had a global top executive relocate to India last year. So, RSX-SZ had huge pressure to compete both in the external markets as well as internally, with their competitive edge in performance and quality as well as profit margin and innovation.

Modern Technology

Technological changes had impacted RSX-SZ, according to the Operation Director. The products that they produce for their customers might become obsolete when modern technology is applied to replace their products. RSX-SZ was under intense pressure to advance in their innovation and technology so that they could substitute those obsolete products with more advanced products.

Corporate Identity

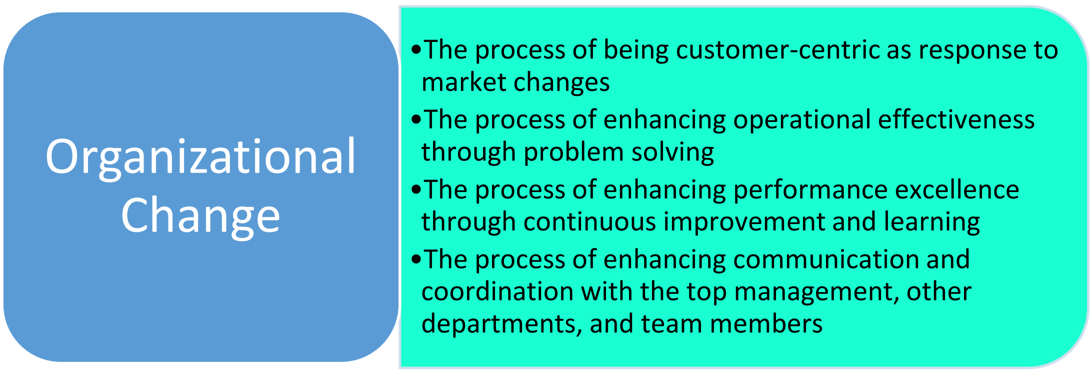
Last but not the least, there was a change in the company's identity. Based on my observation at the site and conversations with the top management and the MMs, the role of RSX-SZ had changed from being the *top site* among all the global facilities to being the *model site* exporting their best practices and expertise to the other global facilities. In the past year the company had moved some of their equipment and huge machines to Europe, India, and other locations. When those sites had encountered technical problems in operating those machines, they came back to RSX-SZ for advice and solutions. The change of leadership had brought about the change of corporate identity for the organization as the model site for the global manufacturing of RSX.

Processes of Leading Organizational Changes and Practices of the MMs

The top management of RSX-SZ frequently stressed that the critical success factors were customer centric, processes, systems, cost control, quality assurance, and innovation. The organizational changes at the macro level were "given" to the leaders of RSX-SZ, that is, the changes were beyond their control. The organization could only respond to those macro-level changes with processes to adapt and to compete. Now I will describe those processes related to the organizational change and analyze how the MMs were affected by those processes and how they adapted to and managed those processes with their leadership practices (see Figure 5.5). Based on my observation there were four processes that the MMs

Figure 5.5

Processes of Leading Organizational Change



were engaged in leading organizational changes: the process of being customer-centric as response to market changes, the process of enhancing operational effectiveness through problem solving, the process of enhancing performance excellence through continuous improvement and learning, and the process of enhancing communication and coordination with the top management, other departments, and team members.

The Process of Being Customer-Centric as Response to Market Changes

The top management of RSX-SZ often emphasized that to respond to the challenges in the business environment, they had to *become customer centric* and to retain the valuable customers with highest quality and innovation instead of just competing in price and cost control. At RSX-SZ, the "vision" of an Operation department was "Customer Centric—Through improving our service levels, while continuing to drive competitiveness." To achieve that vision, the department focused on "reducing the transaction costs, inventory, and obsolescence; productivity/wastage, 5% below standard; customer satisfaction, 90% & 98%."

Being customer centric according to the PD was less about low costs; instead, it was more about innovation of product and technology, process, production and operation efficiency, and continuous improvement of quality. Being customer centric at the MM level, based on my observation of the MMs' reports and conversations, was often related to catering to the product specifications and requirements as well as managing customer complaints efficiently and responsibly. To gain the buy-in from the customers, the MMs needed to provide solid evidence and data to support their recommendations or solutions. The MMs needed to work with customers, corporate office personnel (Preproduction and Quality), top management, other departments, and direct team members to define the customer requirements or quality complaints, explore solutions, decide on the options, influence the top management, corporate personnel, the customers, and other stake holders, and then execute the production plan or complaint solutions.

The Tale of Two Million Defective Chips. On the first day of my ethnographic study I heard about the big technical problem related to a certain semiconductor chip in a product for a VIP customer, which could cost the company millions of dollars if the defect issue was not resolved. According to the Operation Director, the customer applied a different quality standard to examine the quality of the semiconductor which was much higher than the usual standard that RSX-SZ was using in the past for their particular product. RSX-SZ could not object to the customer's unexpected and unreasonable change of much higher standard. The Operation Director along with the QPP Team, were working to prove their case to the corporate office and the customer, in order to avoid a huge loss (they might have to discard the two million units of expensive component as wastage if such high standard was applied to test their quality).

It was in the War Room where the concerned teams and technical experts were working together to identify the problems and to find the solutions as a cross-functional team or task force. The War Room was meant to be the place for problem solving, communication, and coordination. I sat at the War Room one day, where the operation and quality teams were tackling a technical problem related to a product which was rejected by a VIP customer. They were trying to examine the defects and identify the root causes of the problem. They even used X-ray to analyze the defects and explored different options to estimate the acceptance level of the batch of chips in stock. The two teams were debating and challenging each other about the methodology and results. Then, Judy, as the QPP leader, made the decision with the team's consent on how to tackle the problem and set the standards of quality assurance.

The Operation Director and the QPP Director were struggling with the quality problem for several weeks and finally came up with an acceptable quality standard, and testing methods were applied to ensure the quality demanded by the VIP customer. When the data results came back after numerous testing, they confirmed their decision on whether the batch could be accepted, and whether the defects were acceptable or not. Judy communicated with the top management and, most importantly, the customer about their solution and recommendation. The customer was satisfied with their recommendations. The case was closed, and the VIP customer was retained.

The Process of Enhancing Operational Effectiveness Through Problem Solving

RSX-SZ used a lot of metrics to monitor their production and operations. They printed standardized notebooks to record data, problems, comments, and actions. There were dashboards and charts summarizing their output, wastage, downtime, and other metrics surrounding them at the meeting rooms or cubicles. They also used a standardized

PowerPoint format to present their performance with highlights, lowlights, strengths, improvements, and actions in one or two slides. They had daily or weekly team briefing meetings to report progress, identify problems, and find solutions as quickly as possible. The purpose of the teams was very clear in those meetings: “Process and quality improvement for performance excellence.” The process and quality improvement for performance excellence at RSX-SX as I observed was mainly achieved by effective problem solving and continuous improvement.

My ethnographic study revealed that the top and the middle management at RSX-SZ used the *collective leadership* in their problem-solving processes. For instance, I followed Judy to attend a meeting called by Joseph, the PD. In the meeting, Joseph wanted both David (the Operation Director) and Judy to help him explore solutions for the wastage challenge. Apparently, the corporate office has continued to raise the bar to reduce wastage targets year after year. The new wastage target (5%) seemed like a mission impossible to RSX-SZ because one big problem was the low volume orders, and they would definitely incur higher wastage than the target. Judy and David were highlighting some of the key issues and making some recommendations to Joseph for his consideration. Joseph listened and asked some questions to clarify the issues and their proposed solutions. The PD and the two DHs were very engaged in the discussion and took ownership of the problem and tried to find the solution together. Joseph seemed to be relying on Judy and David to give him the workable solutions. Both DHs were able to respond to the challenge of execution. They were able to dialogue and solve the problem together as a team. It was the first time that I witnessed the PD and the two DHs working together to solve a problem. I also sensed the leadership moment in the meeting.

It was intriguing to me that in the above instance they never questioned the rationale behind such target, that is, whether it was reasonable and achievable; they just went on to solve the problem with any possible solutions. There was no question asked about the policy itself! They did not consider the option of negotiating with the corporate office about special provision for the low volume wastage target. The MMs in responding to corporate policies or targets seemed to be *submission and problem solving only*. To the local top management and the MMs, the corporate policies or targets seemed to be nonnegotiable. Submission to corporate policies and commitment to problem solving could be distinctive in the Chinese culture as well as in the organizational culture of RSX-SZ.

On another occasion, Joseph, Judy, David, together with the process engineer, the printing operation manager, and the quality assurance supervisor, were meeting to tackle a customer complaint about the printing quality of a certain product. Judy was facilitating the meeting: (a) she first tried to identify the problem, (b) she went on to analyze the possible causes of the problem, (c) she led the team to explore possible solutions, and (d) she summarized the investigation and solution management process with an Ishikawa diagram (fish bone diagram). Joseph commented about the solutions briefly and recommended the printing operation manager to trace back those stocks which were produced around the same time as the batch that was complained about by the customer. The team agreed on the action plan and the meeting was adjourned.

I was surprised by the fact that throughout the meeting no question was asked about why the problem occurred and who should be responsible or blamed for the problem. Everybody was focused on finding the solution together. Being *solution-focused* and adapting a *no blaming approach* perhaps seemed to be an important leadership practice in problem solving at RSX-SZ.

This no blaming practice was confirmed by the Preproduction Director, Ryan. He told me about a technical problem at the design stage in which one engineer of his team overlooked a certain specification of the customer, but that specification was never mentioned clearly in the specification document. The company had the corporate office involved in verifying the designs and specification, but no one detected the problem in the preproduction process. Finally, the design problem came out and the cause of the problem was identified. Though the junior engineer was at fault, he was not blamed on the problem solely because all other levels of the preproduction team were involved in the verification of the designs. At the end, no one was blamed.

However, Ryan told me that if someone had to take the blame, as the DH of the

Preproduction Team, he was willing to *take the blame* to protect his team members. On the other hand, Ryan asserted that he *negotiated* with the concerned departments and corporate people to defend his team when they should not take the responsibility or the blame. I had seen him do that at the management team meeting.

Problem solving could be the beginning of leading change because something wrong had happened in the production processes, and it needed to be resolved and changed. After the problem was fixed, the organization usually did the post-mortem to understand more about the underlying causes that had brought about the problem. It was not just about being solution-focused; it was about the continuous improvement and learning work that the MMs were required to do. I will turn to this important process in the next section.

The Process of Enhancing Performance Excellence Through Continuous Improvement and Learning

While some organizational changes such as outsourcing, off-shoring, and digitalization, require drastic actions and fast adaptation to the new; many companies like RSX-SZ preferred continuous improvement and incremental changes to avoid the over-reaction or resistance from the impacted staff and stakeholders. They wanted to improve the quality and process of their operations through continuous improvement and learning.

RSX-SZ had a 12-member Continuous Improvement (CI) team to look into different ways to improve the processes, systems, and facility management while the operation and production teams continue to go about conducting their day-to-day business. The CI team worked with the frontline workers and managers to understand their issues, to analyze the problems, and to explore better ways or systems (hardware or software). It was about *incremental change* and improvement.

Leading continuous improvement at RSX-SZ often started with a small step with a small group of people involved in the pilot project. Then they put the change into full implementation. The process of continuous improvement might work better with small change plus good feedback and implementation strategy. MMs could act as facilitators or experimenters to try out the new ways of working, and *to give their feedback* to the CI team. When the CI team was presenting their new ideas to the management team, the MMs were usually very receptive to their proposals, but they could also voice out their concerns and opinions in open and constructive manners. I seldom saw the MMs resist continuous improvement projects. That might be attributed to the corporate culture of “Curious,” which implied innovation, continuous improvement, and learning among all leaders and team members.

For instance, in the first two months of my study, I observed that the CI team was testing an elevation platform to put on the desk of the managers for ergonomics and wellness reasons. The device could enable the managers or professional staffs to stand up while working with their notebooks and monitors. They first assigned four managers to test out the new device and to give feedback to the CI team before they decided for full implementation. I also had one device on my desk after the initial testing. I did not use it for standing up while working, but I found it useful to have my monitor raised at my eye level with the device. Other DHs who had the devices installed eventually got used to standing up posture while they were working at their cubicles. Changing employees' working posture was in fact a BIG CHANGE!

On the other hand, the Quality Assurance (QA) team under the QPP department was responsible to deal with customer complaints, investigate the quality problems, recommend solutions to deal with the problems, and improve the processes and systems whenever necessary. They did not just want to solve the quality problems; instead, they wanted to *build a culture of beliefs and practices* among the whole organization. At a QA team meeting, I observed that the team was talking about implementing the P-FMEA (Process-Failure Mode and Effects Analysis), which is a quality assurance process introduced by the automobile industry in recent years, and many manufacturing companies started to use the same process and standards to do QA work. At RSX-SZ the management wanted to rely on the process and system to monitor the production and to make necessary corrective actions whenever a quality problem occurs. The quality manager told his team at the team meeting, "It is not just a method, but most importantly a belief about performance excellence. It is not just an individual's work, but the work of the whole organization."

To put being "curious" as a corporate value into practice, Joseph pushed numerous learning and development programs in the first six months. He had allocated over one million RMB for training and development purpose in 2021. Joseph sent the DHs and other middle managers to attend conferences and exhibitions so that they could be exposed to the new business trends and technologies instead of just looking at themselves and being complacent. The DHs were receptive to the new training initiatives, and they *participated* in those trainings as much as they could. They also *encouraged* their middle managers and team members to join those trainings for development and retention reasons. All the staff had felt the difference because they had never joined so many trainings before.

The Tale of Lean Sigma. RSX-SZ applied the Lean Sigma methodology to improve their operations. More importantly, they wanted to foster a new set of beliefs and practices among their leaders, managers, and operational staff in continuous improvement and learning. RSX-SZ adapted the Lean Sigma methodology in developing that new culture. The company hired a process consultant to conduct seven days of Lean Sigma training for all the DHs, managers, engineers, and supervisors. That was a huge commitment and investment from the company in terms of training fee and managerial time. After the training, the participants of the Lean Sigma training formed five project teams based on their different lines of work, to apply the Six Sigma concepts and methods, to study their various processes, and to recommend improvements. Judy was facilitating the project teams to guide them in applying the Six Sigma concepts and methods.

In July, I attended the presentation and coaching sessions of four of those project teams. The Lean Sigma consultant was invited to hear the presentations and to give feedback to the project teams. The project team members were mostly N-3 or N-4 supervisors and engineers. They firstly presented the problems that they sought to solve. Then they explained the Six Sigma tools that they applied to analyze the problems and why they had chosen those tools. Finally, they summarized their findings based on the data collected and gave their recommendation for sustained improvements. The consultant gave his feedback and suggestions to the project teams to improve on their concepts, methods, and even presentation skills. Judy also supplemented with her observations and professional input. The project teams were stimulated and inspired to learn and apply the new knowledge to their work. As observed, they were much more encouraged when they found that their analysis and recommendation were valid and useful for problem solving and continuous improvement. They also seemed to appreciate the company's effort in training and developing them professionally while trying to improve on the processes and systems of the plant.

I could see the leadership moment when two project teams were presenting their findings and recommendations. Both teams were trying to tackle some quality problems in two different processes of the production line. They applied different Six Sigma methods to analyze the data collected in the past 12 months. They identified the possible causes of the problems with scientific evidence. However, the project teams were not confident to present their solutions because they were afraid that they might be wrong. The QPP Director gave her approval to their recommendations and guided them in how to present their analysis and recommendations to the management. The process consultant, after hearing their presentation, affirmed their effort and result by saying, “That is a black belt project!” In fact, they were just passing their green belt, the elementary level of Lean Sigma training.

Continuous improvement and learning were essential processes that the organization was using in managing challenges from organizational changes in the business environment and internal organization structures. Those processes were mainly focused on operational and technical matters. Managing organizational change with people, leadership change at the top management and personnel change at the lower levels could be totally different matters, which require different processes and practices. Enhancing communication and coordination with the top management, other departments, and team members was another important process that I observed at RSX-SZ in managing organizational change and operational issues.

The Process of Enhancing Communication and Coordination With the Top Management, Other Departments, and Team Members

At the company and department levels the MMs were always faced with the challenges of customer demands, team integration, motivation for performance breakthrough, and retention of team members under the organizational changes. While there were many things that they could not change, the MMs could still communicate and coordinate their business tasks and targets with the top management, other departments, and their teams, to achieve their operational objectives.

The DHs at RSX-SZ did a lot of communication and coordination work with the top management, other departments, and their teams. The daily management team Briefing and department briefings at different floors were all meant for communication and coordination purposes. In the shadowing exercise, I could see, during the normal week, both DHs were trying to communicate and coordinate with other departments to solve different problems and to manage different projects. In some of those days, they literally had back-to-back meetings throughout the day with other departments, their superior, and direct reports. They always talked about some important measures and data analysis. They might highlight what problems they were facing, but they never spent much time discussing about those problems or brainstorming solutions together as a management team; they just let the experts do the job and find the solutions off-line.

With Top Management. The PD is the chairman of the management team meeting. He relies on the DHs to report to him and the rest of the team about key issues happening in their departments. For instance, at a management team meeting, Joseph told the DHs, "If you have sensed any risk in the production process, you need to tell me, because if you do not, I will not know, whereas Alex could have known about those risks as soon as it happened." Therefore, I noticed that at the management team meetings the DHs tried to *inform* Joseph about operational and personnel issues proactively and *supported* Joseph in his management of the company. The DHs also met with Joseph very frequently on a one-on-one basis or in a small group, to deal with more complicated issues in the afternoon.

In the transition of the Operation department and the QPP department, the two DHs needed to depend on the ex-leader (the new PD) to coach their new team members or, if necessary, handle those technical problems for them. They seemed to recognize that it was part of the communication and coordination process during leadership transition. They kept close communication with their direct reports, particularly the middle managers (N-2) and the team supervisors. They also worked side-by-side with Joseph whenever he was dealing with those operational or technical matters with their teams. They proactively informed Joseph about risks in operations and people management.

With Other Departments. The process of communication and coordination with other departments among cross-functional meetings or operational teams requires taking ownership of the problem that they needed to solve together, or the purposes of the cross-functional team and the operational teams. Then, they contributed their knowledge, experience, and perspectives based on their background and roles in the organization, to achieve the purpose together as a team. Based on my observation at the cross-functional teams and the operational teams the DHs in those meetings were listening carefully, facilitating discussion, clarifying the problems, confronting issues or discrepancies, resolving differences, drawing consensus for problem solving or decisions, and summarizing for follow up actions. In a nutshell, they tried to *provide feedback* and to *collaborate* with other departments.

For instance, the QPP Director, Judy, had been involved in a few cross-functional teams, and she attended those task force meetings in the afternoon. One of them was the Escalation Process meeting. The Escalation Process Team consisted of members from HR, Quality, and other departments; Judy was the most senior staff in the team. The conveners were presenting on their proposed process at the RSX-SZ site based on the corporate office guidelines. However, Judy did not agree to their proposal. She pointed out the problem with it by drawing a diagram on the white board about the normal escalation process at RSX-SZ. She then quickly recommended some modifications of their proposal to align the corporate guidelines with the actual situation of the RSX-SZ. The team agreed, and they revised the proposal and present to the management team later. In cross-functional teams, very often the senior executives usually play the supportive role and let the team do the work, and they just give some general feedback or comment. Judy was different; she did let the facilitator lead the discussion, but when she saw a problem with their proposal, she did not hesitate to intervene and point out the problem.

With Team Members. In leading organizational change, how to gain the acceptance of their leadership and their buy-in of the team members towards change, communication and coordination with team members often became more complicated than the MMs could have anticipated. For instance, when the Finance department of RSX-SZ tried to replace the manual and routine accounting work with artificial intelligence, some of the finance team members were resisting the change. Though the CFO-North Asia, Wendy, tried to explain to them about the advantages of the digitalization, from business perspective as well as from their career development perspective (that is, they could focus on more advance and professional accounting work), the impacted employees did not accept the change for job security or other reasons. Some of them might be afraid of change and learning itself, having been very stable in their existing jobs. In contrast, the operational and technical staff seemed to be more receptive to technological changes because they were very much involved in the technical processes, and they knew very well that technology and digitalization impacted on their works and careers. Finance and accounting staff, on the other hand, were too used to the traditional manual transactions. They were lacking the mindset to accept and manage technological changes.

Some of the DHs needed to *motivate and coach* the teams for performance breakthrough and team building purposes. Others might need to establish their leadership and authority among the new team members when they had just taken up some new roles and responsibilities. For instance, during the daily briefing in the initial months after the leadership change, David mainly listened and followed the conversations between Joseph and his team members. When Joseph did not show up at the briefing meetings, David took the initiative to chair the meeting. He listened and asked questions, but he did not give many directives to the teams because he realized that he was still learning about the processes, and he needed to depend on the team leaders to handle some of those issues. He also had one-on-one sessions with his engineers and coached them on their technical tasks and projects.

Likewise, Judy empowered the process and product teams to handle the technical issues. She accepted the fact that Joseph was their ex-supervisor and thus the teams could consult him about technical issues, which she could not resolve for them. She only expected the teams to inform her about those issues so she could know how to respond when the corporate office should enquire her about those issues. She clarified her expectations to her team at a team briefing during my shadowing exercise in July. In the meantime, Judy demonstrated her strengths in quality assurance and management, and she knew how to communicate with the corporate office about those technical issues better than the technical engineers.

Moreover, at the department meeting where all her team members were present, Judy pointed out that there were challenges for the new integrated team to have trust on her and other members. To build a trusted relationship she made an open appeal to the team to work and communicate together. She promised that she would do her best to help the team grow and perform better. At the end of the meeting she said, “It is a two-way traffic; I cannot do it alone without your support.” I sat with the technical team, and I saw that they were thinking and reflecting seriously. Later, when I was shadowing Judy during the week, I saw that the atmosphere at the briefing with the team leaders was very pleasant (that is, they could freely talk and laugh during the meeting). Apparently, Judy's communicating with her team openly and honestly had paid off well.

The Tale of Tea Reception. Some organizational changes or new initiatives failed miserably because of the lack of ownership, communication, and coordination. In the case of tea reception, Joseph felt that the pantry and common area had been underused, whereas the staff in general office felt reluctant to stay in the common area to talk and relax (it is right in front of the top executives' offices). He wanted to foster a more relaxed and friendly working environment at the office. So, together with the HR department, Joseph organized a monthly after lunch "tea reception" on the last Friday of the month. He even approved a generous budget to prepare food and drinks so people could come together to enjoy and chat.

On that day when the first tea reception was organized, I came back to the research site just to attend this milestone event of RSX-SZ. The snacks and drinks were very good. Joseph was very excited, walking around the common area to make sure that things were well prepared and presented. However, only those staff on the second floor (the general office) were informed about the party, and the other staff on the first floor, third floor, and fourth floor did not know anything about the event. Moreover, people on the second floor just came to the pantry, grabbed the food, and went back to their cubicles to eat without hanging around at the pantry and common area for casual chats. There were no speeches by Joseph or the HR Manager to promote the event and to explain the purpose of the event. Last, but not the least, they ordered fruit punch as drinks, but the taps of the bottles were jammed by the fruits so that people could not get the drinks. After 10 minutes, all the people disappeared from the pantry, and it was all quiet again. Joseph looked rather disappointed.

I was thinking that a good wedding or event planner could do a better communication and coordination job than the HR Manager, who was in charge of the event (even the HR Manager did not show up at the event himself; it was another HR Manager who filled in the leadership vacuum and tried to fix things). After all, visioning, communicating, and implementing are all important steps in leading change—even a small change!

On August 30, I attended the August tea reception, and it was a great success. People were gathering to enjoy the food and drinks as well as the conversations around the common area. Interesting enough, it was the new HR team who was organizing the event and they had done a great job despite the fact that the HR Director was on leave and Joseph became the acting HRD. The tea reception was supposed to start at 2:00 p.m., but the organizing HR team (four people) were at the pantry area setting up the food and drinks from much before-hand. They even prepared a small amplifier to play some background music during the reception. Music made a big difference in creating a warm and friendly atmosphere. I did not know who was in charge of the event, but at least I felt that the whole team was leading and taking ownership of the event. There was a leadership moment at the tea reception.

The tea reception event reflected the need for MMs to have good communication and coordination as a leadership practice with their top management, their peer managers of other departments, and their team members. Personnel changes might not be so bad after all. Moreover, initial failure is not a problem, if only if the organization could learn and improve.

The processes of leading organizational change involved macro and micro changes, which required MMs to be customer-centric, to enhance their teams in problem solving, learning, and continuous improvement, and to communicate effectively with the stakeholders before, during, and after the change. In the next section I will explore processes of managing leadership change and practices of middle managers.

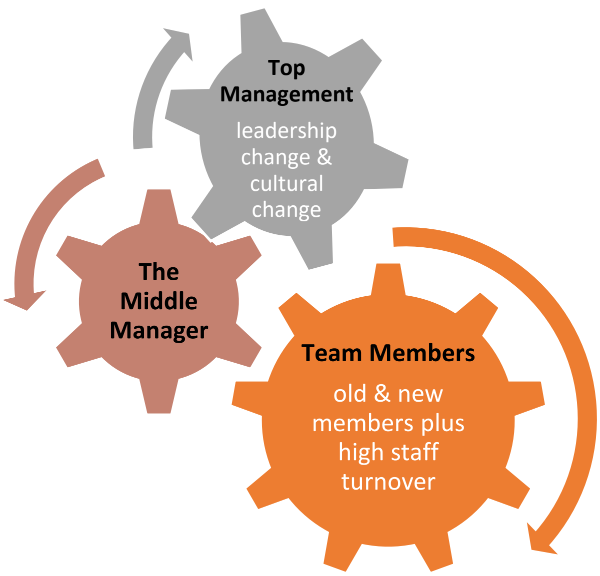
Processes of Managing Leadership Change and Practices of the MMs

At the meso level the relocation and integration of the three sites did not bring about a massive reorganization of the departments and teams; it was the leadership change that had triggered the reorganization of the roles of the DHs and the teams, according to the top leaders. After the integration and reorganization of the departments in October 2020 some DHs needed to take over other operations and to supervise new teams whom they had not worked with before, because of their different background and specialization in the plant operations. Both David and Judy had inherited new team members into their departments. Those team members reported to Joseph before he was promoted to the PD position.

Moreover, under the organization change the concerned DHs needed to manage the relationship with their new top management and to rebuild their relationships with the new and old team members (Figure 5.6). As described in Figure 5.6, the top leaders could influence the organizations based on where they came from with their values, perceptions, expectations, and personalities. MMs could carry cultural paradigms and personal perceptions to look at their new leadership and the new corporate culture. Organizational change at the top and below involved both managing up and managing down by the MMs; the MMs were caught in the middle between the top management and their team members. During leadership and team transitions, the MMs faced the challenges of team building, and sometimes unexpected staff turnover, which they could not have any control over.

Figure 5.6

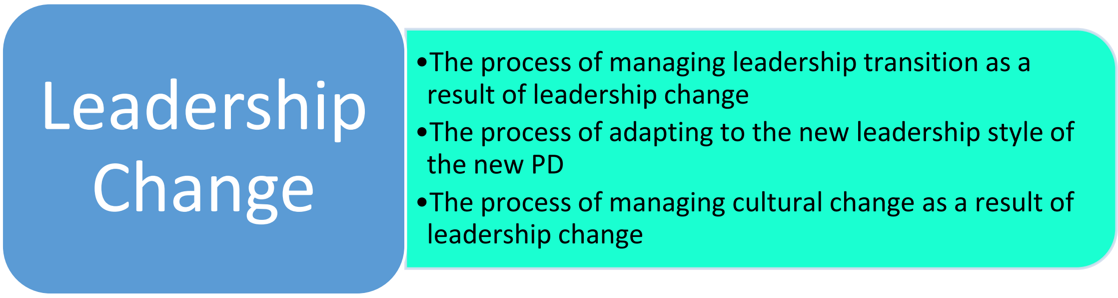
Organizational Change at the Top and Below



Leadership change brought about the processes of managing leadership transition, adapting to the new leadership style of the new PD, and managing cultural change as a result of leadership change (see Figure 5.7). Those processes were triggered interactively and perhaps reflexively as described in Figure 5.7 among the top leaders and the MMs concerned.

Figure 5.7

Processes of Managing Leadership Change



The Process of Managing Leadership Transition as a Result of Leadership Change

There is a Chinese saying, “Touching one stone at a time while crossing the river.” While the future path is uncertain, the person who seeks to cross the river should explore the path one step at a time. That principle could be aptly applied to managing leadership transition as a result of leadership change and team reorganization.

To gain the acceptance and recognition from the DHs as their new leader, Joseph, told me that he had deliberately given the DHs much autonomy to run their departments because he realized that he could never act like Alex who knew every operation inside-out. He needed the whole management team to support him to lead the operations of RSX-SZ. The DHs seemed to respond positively to Joseph’s showing of his humility and vulnerability by giving him their full support and informing him about various issues in the plant.

David, in turn, began to chair the briefing meetings when Joseph was not present during April to July. By the end of August, David had officially taken over all the operational teams in the three floors. Likewise, Judy needed to accept the fact that the technical teams were dealing with Joseph directly about their technical problems even though she was supposed to be their direct supervisor. She realized that she could not solve those technical problems with Joseph's and David's expertise. On the other hand, she stressed to her technical teams that they should at least inform her about those important issues lest she appeared to be ignorant about those issues at the corporate quality team meetings.

As time went by the team members were getting used to the fact that the DHs were their new leaders and they had begun to take the lead. For instance, one N-2 team leader told me that in the beginning he was not happy about the reorganization of the QPP department and having Judy as his new supervisor. After a few months, he realized that the leadership change would continue regardless of how he felt about it. Therefore, he started to communicate with the new leader more openly and directly, to sort out the problems and differences. Mentally, he tried to think more positively about the change and manage his own career under the new leadership. He also mentioned to me that the communication between the new DH and him was important and useful to bridge the gap of understanding and relationship during transition. So, both the leader and the team members needed to understand and adapt to each other.

For the top management and the MMs in managing leadership change, they needed *to be flexible* and fluid in transition management, particularly during leadership transition at the top. The integration and reorganization of teams had brought about team building issues and resistance among some team members. Some of the DHs told me that they needed to learn and adjust to the many challenges during leadership transition in their respective teams. In the initial months of the integration, both DHs experienced the storming behaviors among some team members, and the leaders needed to deal with the challenges posed by those members.

For example, some managers (N-2) were upset about their new DH because the DH did not have strong technical background about their line of products; they felt like they were following a general who did not know how to fight the battle with them, and the general did not know how to manage the people either. Other middle managers of another department did not want their new DH to rock the boat, that is, changing their old ways of doing things in their units which were beneficial to them. Some of the N-2 managers and N-3 engineers might still go directly to Alex and Joseph about some technical issues because they were most familiar with those matters.

The DHs needed to lead and manage the new teams, and deal with any resistance to their new leadership among some team members. They seemed to understand that the two extremes of commanding or pacifying them were not effective to establish their authority and leadership. According to David and Judy, they profoundly realized that they needed to be patient and sometimes tolerate resistance from the new team members. For instance, Judy told me that some of the N-3 staff refused to talk to her about certain technical issues and they insisted that she should ask the N-2 managers. Initially, she felt that they were disrespecting her and rejecting her. Later, she had the opportunity to check with the N-2 manager concerned and she realized that the N-3 engineer was only being direct with her because he really did not have any idea what those issues were all about. Moreover, it was his usual communication style to respond to questions that he did not have an answer to; it was not meant to be personal or disrespectful towards her. Judy eventually learned that during leadership and team transitions she needed to *communicate with her team more openly* and check her own assumptions about people and their reactions towards her as their new leader.

The Process of Adapting to the New Leadership Style of the New PD

The leadership change at the top level could imply the need for adjustment to the new leadership style and organizational culture brought about by the new leaders. Managing up became a challenge because most of the B5+1 had worked with Alex as PD for over 8–20 years. While Alex was a very demanding boss according to the DHs, the B5+1 had adapted to his management style, and they seemed to like working under him. Some of the DHs thought that Alex was direct and fair to them. Joseph, on the other hand, had been their peer before. One DH was Joseph's boss when he first joined the company. It was observed that Joseph had kept a distance with the B5+1 even before his promotion. For instance, I never saw Joseph sit with the B5+1 during lunch, whereas he set with other N-2 or N-3 managers and engineers. Some DHs confirmed the above observation. They reckoned that probably Joseph was anticipating taking on the leadership role and thus he deliberately maintained a relatively distant professional relationship with the B5+1.

According to my observation and conversation with the DHs, most of them were very much at the *wait-and-see mode* to adjust to the new leadership style of the PD. They had felt that the leadership change had also brought about cultural changes at RSX-SZ. As they had been used to working under Alex's relatively dominant leadership style, they had no issues in following Joseph's instructions and supporting him in his new initiatives of cultural change. While Joseph tried to apply a more open and participative leadership style, the DHs were still trying to understand what he wanted to do and how they could work with him as their new boss.

Some of the DHs expressed that Joseph was less demanding at the management team meeting compared to Alex, who usually confronted them with all kinds of questions, expected an immediate response, and demanded very detailed information. They were saying that in the past the management team meeting could last until 1 p.m. and they could not have lunch. Joseph, in contrast, was gentler with them and they felt more relaxed at the management team meetings now. For sure, I had not seen any direct disagreement, not to mention confrontation, between the DHs and Joseph in the different interaction settings. One DH told me that she had a different view about some personnel arrangement from Joseph's suggestion. She expressed her opinion, but she finally complied to Joseph's decision about the final team arrangement. "After all, Joseph is the PD," she said. In the private and public dialogues with the top management and their team members, the DHs were careful to *acknowledge the new top leadership* and to show their respect to the new PD.

After eight months of leadership change and organizational change, the DHs were comfortable about the new leadership style of the new PD when I asked them about their feelings towards Joseph. They were mostly *supportive* of Joseph's decisions about operations, budgeting, and people management issues. However, according to most of the DHs interviewed, the pressure to deliver performance and quality was no less than in Alex's time. Instead, with Alex being the VP-Global Manufacturing, the DHs sometimes felt stressful in dealing with the tasks and targets imposed by the corporate office under the policy of improving performance and efficiency.

The Tale of the Two Top Leaders. RSX-SZ's top management (the VP and the PD) used to be represented by the expatriate executives, who worked in the HQ, regional offices, or local sites. In the history of RSX-SZ, the top executives had been predominantly Europeans. Joseph Chen was the first Chinese PD in the RSX organization. Many MNCs operating in China could have their corporate culture and values on paper but the actual organizational cultures of the local sites are shaped by the local ethnic cultures as well as the local top management. Therefore, it was both leadership change and cultural change to the organization.

The promotion of the PD was announced in October 2020 at RSX-SZ, but the leadership transition in terms of role change and team reorganization had extended until April and the final handover of some departments happened only in June and July 2021. It had been a gradual process which lasted for more than nine months.

During the initial period of leadership transition, Alex was still very much involved in the RSX-SZ operation and business issues according to the PD and the DHs. Joseph was acting as the DH for the Supply Chain department during Mary's leave of absence until March 2021. He was also managing the first floor and the third floor operations, while David was busy tackling another major technical problem with a VIP customer in the beginning of the leadership transition. By June 2021, both Alex and Joseph had gradually moved away from their management roles in the departments and let the DHs lead the integrated teams.

Finally, one interesting observation was that the DHs usually referred to Alex as "the Boss" whereas they called Joseph "Director Chen" or his whole name "Joseph Chen" as if Joseph was still their peer. So, they were adapting to the new top management with two levels (Alex and Joseph), whereas in the past the top management was only one person, Alex. Physically, Alex was sitting next to Joseph. Joseph profoundly realized that Alex still had his position power as well as personal power over the RSX-SZ business, operational, and personnel matters. He had been careful to keep Alex involved and informed about major issues at the plant and the changes that he intended to make in the organization. Alex had made it very clear to Joseph that he supported Joseph's initiatives of organizational change only if RSX-SZ's business results and performance were achieved above standard.

Psychologically, the DHs were still thinking that Alex was the Boss. Joseph seemed to be more empowering and delegating in his relationship with the DHs, whereas Alex was more autocratic, and he maintained an arm's length with his direct reports. According to some DHs, Alex might think that Joseph was trusting the DHs too much. Perhaps, that could be one of the reasons that Joseph had maintained an arm's length social distance with the DHs. On the other hand, the DHs were careful to manage the two-level top management at RSX-SZ and they needed to recognize both Alex and Joseph as their bosses with different levels of trust and respect.

The Process of Managing Cultural Change as a Result of Leadership Change

The leadership change at RSX-SZ at the top level had brought about cultural changes. While Joseph was careful in asserting his new leadership among the management team, he was determined to rebuild the culture of the company. RSX-SZ had the five corporate values printed in their office pillars and even on their company T-shirts: Trusted, Curious, Together, Daring, and Caring. Joseph had expressed that he wanted to rebuild or emphasize the organizational culture to build trust, care, and other corporate values "in practice instead of just printed on the wall." One of the cultural changes that he had already put into practice was starting meetings on time. In the past, the ex-PD often started the meetings 15 minutes late depending on his availability, and sometimes the meetings dragged on for more than an hour.

To build a trusted organization, Joseph focused on enhancing transparency and communication. He did this in the following ways: he held monthly all management team meetings (including all the N-1 and N-2 managers). After the first six months of operation, he conducted a company-wide review and planning exercise. Each department needed to present their H1 & H2 reports (Half 1 is the review of the first half of the year in terms of performance, challenges, and actions ahead; Half 2 is the projection of the future with vision, targets, and action plans). Joseph invited some DHs to attend the H1 & H2 meetings of various departments to give their feedback and comments.

I was present at one of those H1 & H2 meetings. Joseph invited Judy to attend the H1 & H2 Review and Planning Meeting of an operation team, so she could give her feedback to the team. Both Joseph and Judy were sitting at the head of the conference table while the managers and supervisors of the operation team were sitting around the table. The two managers were presenting their review and plan with the PowerPoint slides. Joseph invited Judy to comment first. Judy *showed her appreciation to the two managers* for their good work and reports. She then highlighted a few issues that she thought that the team could continue to work on. Finally, Joseph gave his remarks, and he urged the team to think out of the box in order to lead and excel in the particular operation, compared with other sites. He said, “The future competencies of RSX-SZ is no longer be low cost; instead, the competitive edge is efficiency and quality. India and Columbia sites are catching up fast, and thus the Shenzhen Site must move faster and get better.” Joseph continued to present that vision for change to the whole organization in the past several months since he had taken up the PD role. While Joseph focused more on the visioning part, Judy emphasized the implementing part by pinpointing certain process and quality or execution issues to the presenting team.

Different from the VP, who usually was the one who gave feedback and comments, Joseph seemed to apply collective leadership in his strategic communication and coordination processes. He involved other DHs to give comments or feedback to the reporting department managers. In Judy’s case, that was an example of how the MM supported the top leader in communication and coordination work.

Joseph wanted to strengthen the together and caring values of the company as staff engagement and retention strategies. He requested that the HR department organized a tea-reception in March after lunch so that staff might come together to chat and enjoy drinks and snacks. Apart from the tea reception, Joseph also encouraged the staff to join different sports clubs including soccer, badminton, yoga, dance, etc. He himself participated in the soccer club and played soccer with the company’s soccer team on every Tuesday evening. The CFO and the Supply Chain Director joined the dance class. I joined the badminton games in the last few months as part of my immersion into the organization. Three of the Big Five joined the badminton games as well, although they did not play regularly. At the game, all the staff could enjoy playing and they were all equal without ranks during the game. I could see that sport activities could really draw people together to enjoy the sport together. The DHs' *participation* had helped in fostering their relationships with their team members and other staff from other departments as well as in supporting the new PD's cultural change.

In the above analysis I have described the processes of managing leadership transition, adapting to the new leadership style of the new PD, and managing the cultural change brought about by leadership change. Those processes involved more with the top management and the DHs at the research site. In the next section, I will look at the MMs' interactions and dialogues with the lower level staffs, particularly in the context of personnel change and unexpected high staff turnover.

Processes of Managing Personnel Change and Practices of the MMs

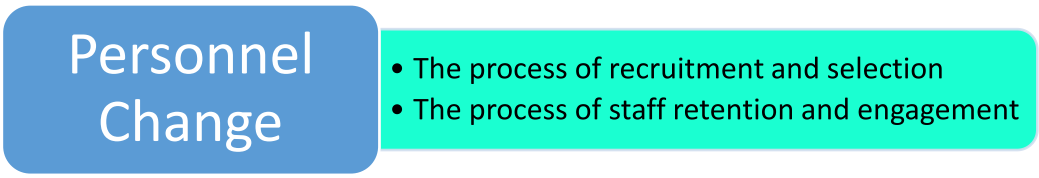
The company did not lose many staff after the relocation because the new location was only within 10 miles away from the old sites and the employees did not need to quit their jobs to avoid long distance travel (the original new site was way up north of SZ). According to Joseph, the integration of the teams in January 2021 only impacted less than 15 employees; some were redeployed to other work units and only five were laid off because of the integration. Staff engagement and retention did not seem to be a problem as they originally had anticipated it in their relocation plan. The global staff engagement survey (Pulse Check) conducted by RSX in early March 2021 also indicated that staff engagement of RSX-SZ was very positive. However, reality indicated otherwise one month after the survey was done.

The company experienced high staff turnover after the Chinese New Year, largely because the general trends in the market had improved and thus other companies were headhunting their people. Moreover, the increment and the bonus of last year were only very minimal (less than 3%). According to the DHs, the basic salaries of RSX-SZ had been below the market rates and many employees could get over 30%–50% increments if they joined new employers. Subsequently, the Finance department lost 10 staff out of 18 within several weeks after the Chinese New Year. The whole Human Resources department (more than 10 staff) except the HR Director had left the company in April to August. Other operational departments had lost their headcounts as well. As of August 2021, it was estimated that RSX-SZ, on average, lost two staff members per week! Apart from salary, some of the leaving staff indicated that lack of promotion prospect and the management styles of their supervisors were the main reasons for their disengagement with the company.

Ironically, the Pulse Check showed that 94% of the respondents indicated that they would stay in the company in the next two years. I asked a HR manager before she left the company about the discrepancy of the Pulse Check result and the actual turnover rate of the staff after the survey. She told me that some managers required the respondents to fill in their names on the Pulse Check questionnaire. Culturally, the Chinese workers, without the assurance of confidentiality, only told the management what they wanted to hear. I was quite surprised by such arrangement, which is not common among MNCs. I was wondering who had authorized that practice: the top management, the HR Director, or the line managers. Whoever authorized that probably had not practiced their corporate value of "Trusted" in the Pulse Check surveying exercise. Nevertheless, the company had made deliberate effort to attack the high staff turnover by the processes of recruitment and selection, staff retention and engagement (Figure 5.8). As outlined in Figure 5.8, the MMs were working very hard with the support of the HR department to recruit new staff and to retain new and existing employees.

Figure 5.8

Processes of Managing Personnel Change



The Process of Recruitment and Selection

To fill the vacant positions with new staff, the HR team had worked very hard and engaged external recruiters to bring in the needed workers. At the management team briefing, the HR Director or other HR representatives updated about the number of vacant positions and the percentage of achievement in filling those positions with the right candidates. The PD, HR Director, and some members of the Big 5 had regular HR meeting in the afternoon to review the candidates and make selection decisions in the meeting.

I only had the opportunity to observe a DH attending the HR management meeting once and, thus, I could not say much about the actual process and practice of the MMs in their recruitment exercises. One of the selection criteria for managerial and professional staff was English proficiency. A DH later expressed to me that with the low salaries that the company offered to the candidates, they could hardly expect the candidates to have good English proficiency. In China it is very rare for electrical engineers, graphic designers, or even human resources professionals processing good English proficiency. Those who could master English well are usually on high demand and, thus, expensive in their compensation package. Nonetheless, RSX-SZ seemed to be able to fill in those vacant positions very quickly. In the meantime, the company was trying to reduce headcounts across the board.

During the budgeting exercise in July, I observed that RSX-SZ adopted a top-down and bottom up approach in budgeting of manpower. The corporate office had given very strict directive of reduction of 10% manpower to streamline their operations. Moreover, they had stipulated that once a staff had left the company, the new hire's salary must not be higher than the departed staff. Joseph instructed the DHs to work on the headcounts and budgets of their departments based on the corporate directives and their business needs and plans in the coming year, particularly the headcounts and the organization structures of their departments. Consequently, the DHs had to mediate between the front-line managers and the top management about headcounts and salary budgets.

For instance, during the shadowing exercise of a DH, a N-3 supervisor was complaining about the reduction of headcount in his unit. He argued that he could not manage the operation if there was any unexpected manpower shortage, e.g., sick leave or annual leave. He was very angry with the management's decision. After the meeting, the DH concerned pulled the supervisor aside and *talked to him gently and patiently* to resolve the conflict and to manage his negative emotions. The DH later told me that they could only reduce the headcount and add more responsibilities to the remaining staff with some minimal increase of salaries as incentives to take on more responsibilities. The DH needed to juggle with policies, budgets, headcounts, salaries, workloads, and staff morale issues all the time. Feeling very helpless and desperate, one DH said to me:

> Our hands are tied, and we could only do so much with the limited budgets and headcounts. I don't know how to hold my team together any longer. All my experienced engineers are leaving, and I couldn't blame them because the new employers offered them 50% more salaries!

The Process of Staff Retention and Engagement

To retain and to engage the team members, some DHs told me that they tried to teach their team members new things, to coach them in their new roles, and to protect them from any blaming or pressures from the corporate office or other departments. The CFO-North Asia, for instance, was discussing with the Finance Director about how to deal with the unexpected high staff turnover at the Finance Team. She literally went on to assign who should *mentor/coach* each remaining staff and new staff. Likewise, when the Supply Chain Director was coaching her N-2 manager about people issues at her subteam, the Director was discussing with the manager how to coach her team based on their potential and performance. On the other hand, they had to work with continuous shortage of manpower in their teams.

A N-3 engineer in the QPP department told me that he really appreciated that the new DH had a one-on-one career coaching session with him. He said that his previous DH had never done that before with him. After the career development discussion, he had a much clearer idea about his career path and how he could develop himself further. The new DH made a deliberate effort to have the career development conversations with her new team members. That seemed to help not only the team transition but also staff engagement. Perhaps, some of those DHs tended to focus too much on tasks and targets, so much so that they neglected the need to have a serious and sincere career development coaching with their direct reports, who might have longed for such an opportunity.

At the end of August, two other engineers in the QPP department resigned, nonetheless despite the effort that Judy had made to rebuild the team and to engage the new team members under her supervision. According to a person who understood the issue, the reason was that those engineers felt that their supervisor was only blaming them for the problems, rather than supporting and guiding them to solve the problems together. The DH concerned might have to accept the reality that in the process of leadership and team transitions, no one could guarantee the final outcome of who would stay and who would leave, for whatever reasons. Staff engagement was always a two way traffic, and the chemistry factor could be something that the MMs had no control over after all. As the CEO of my company, I could certainly echo to that dilemma.

The Tale of Retaining and Engaging Nancy. A more in-depth example of this retaining and engaging process was observed when the QPP Director, Judy, had to do one-on-one coaching with a junior staff, Nancy (fictitious name), in the Quality Assurance Team. Nancy was three levels down in the organizational hierarchy and she was assigned to manage some of the tasks of the resigned supervisor. She had very little experience in handling customer complaints. However, she did not have the knowledge and experience to manage such challenging tasks because any mistakes could imply strong reactions from the customers, which could bring about serious financial consequences.

According to Judy, the two supervisors above Nancy were not able to support and coach Nancy, and thus she did not necessarily follow the accountability line in the organization. Judy told me that she did not bother with the reactions of the two supervisors because she felt that it was more important to retain and support Nancy. Otherwise, she could lose Nancy and she could not afford more staff turnover in her team.

The coaching session took place at the end of a long day at 6:15 p.m. I was shadowing Judy throughout the day meetings after meetings. I was exhausted, but Judy was still very energetic to conduct the coaching session with Nancy. They were sitting together at the cubicle of Judy's office. They were looking at the email correspondence with the customer while I was sitting two meters away observing the whole process. Judy was very patient to review the customer complaint emails with Nancy. She showed Nancy in a step-by-step manner how she could have handled that complaint with good quality assurance concepts and processes. Nancy was anxious to listen to and follow her DH during the coaching.

It was the first time I saw a DH coach a N-4 staff (usually I could see the interactions and dialogues between the DHs with their N-2 staff in group or individual sessions). Management and leadership literature could talk about delegation and empowerment. In reality, many MMs needed to motivate and coach very junior staff for staff retention, contingency management, and business continuity reasons. Those were the real-life leadership practices of MMs.

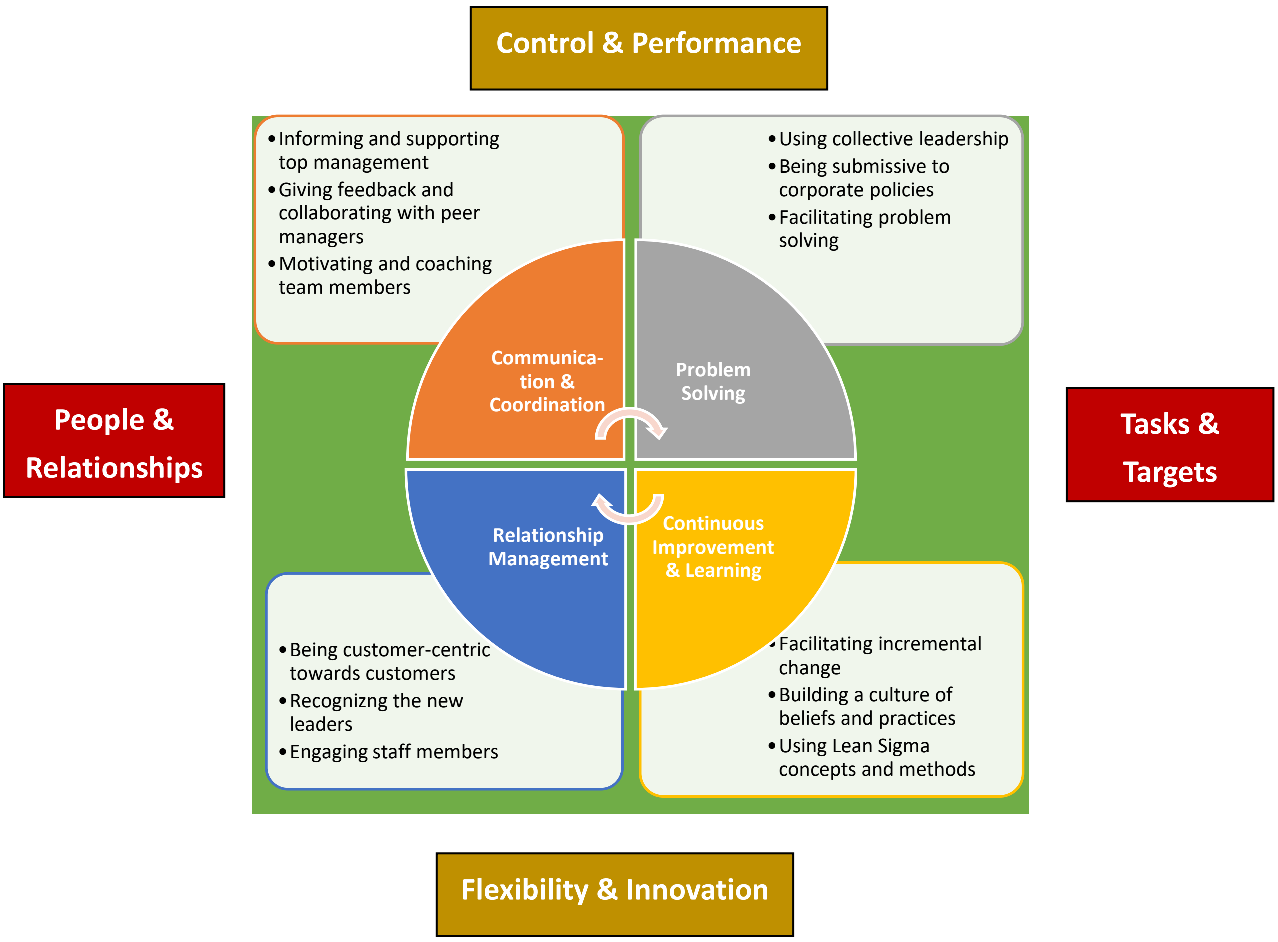
In the beginning of this data analysis, I argued that leadership practices of MMs should be understood within the contexts of change and the processes brought about by those changes. Then, I have described in detail the organizational change, leadership change, and personnel change at the research site and analyzed from the ethnographic data various processes directly or indirectly brought about by those changes. Now I will infer from those processes the practices of MMs in leading and managing those changes.

Leadership Practices of the MMs Engaged in Leading Change

In Figure 5.9, four main leadership practices were showed from the data analysis: (a) problem solving, (b) continuous improvement and learning, (c) relationship management, and (d) communication and coordination. In this section I will further elaborate those main

Figure 5.9

Leadership-as-Practice of the MMs in Leading Change



leadership practices with sub practices, which were the actions that the MMs take in dealing with particular significant others in the processes or situations that emerged from organizational, leadership, and personnel changes.

The leadership practices were the actual actions of the MMs in leading and managing change (Figure 5.9). As depicted in Figure 5.9 some of those leadership practices were related to *tasks and targets* about the manufacturing setting of RSX-SZ on *control and performance*. Other leadership practices were focusing on *people and relationships* which needed *flexibility and creativity* on the part of the MMs. In leading change, the MMs applied different or similar leadership practices in managing those interactions and dialogues with their significant others in the organization. For instance, coaching and mentoring as a leadership practice could be applied in communication and coordination of Sigma projects as well as in career development conversations with the team members.

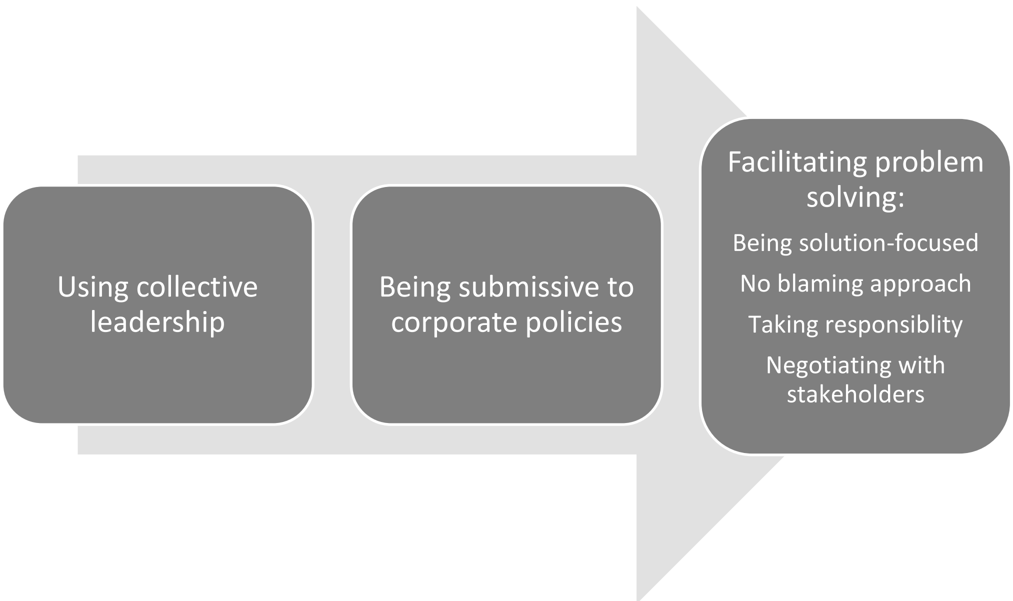
In this section I will seek to organize the leadership practices under the two dimensions: (a) tasks and targets vs. people and relationships, and (b) control and performance vs. flexibility and innovation. Four main leadership practices were derived from the processes of leading change in the ethnographic data: (a) *problem solving*, (b) *continuous improvement and learning*, (c) *relationship management*, and (d) *communication and coordination*. In the quadrant, problem solving practice is focused on tasks and targets with control and performance as purpose. Continuous improvement and learning practice is focused on tasks and targets with flexibility and innovation. Relationship management practice is focused on people and relationships with flexibility and innovation. Finally, communication and coordination practice is focused on tasks and targets with control and performance as purpose. It should be noted that the four quadrants are *circular* in view instead of *linear* because all those leadership practices were intertwined and applied by the MMs based on the different circumstances encountered in the organization. In the following paragraphs I will analyze the practices of the MMs in managing leadership change.

The Problem-Solving Practice

The problem-solving practice had the characteristics of using collective leadership, being submissive to corporate policies, and facilitating problem-solving by being solution-focused, characterized by a no blaming approach as summarized in Figure 5.10.

Figure 5.10

Problem-Solving Practice of the MMs



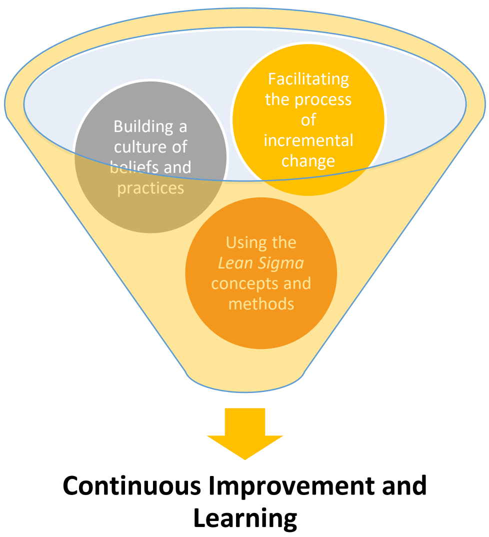
The MMs also took the responsibility to solve the problem or to take the blame whenever necessary. Moreover, the MMs negotiated with the stakeholders to solve the problem as expert in the subject matter or facilitator of the problem-solving process.

The Continuous Improvement and Learning Practice

The processes and practices of continuous improvement and learning at RSX-SZ is summarized in Figure 5.11. In Figure 5.11, the continuous improvement and learning practice were very much built into the organizational structure of RSX-SZ as a process for incremental change. For the leadership-as-practice in leading continuous improvements, the MMs were required to understand those processes and systems thoroughly, then educate and train the relevant QA and operational staff to use those processes and systems. Training and

Figure 5.11

Continuous Improvement and Learning Practice of the MMs



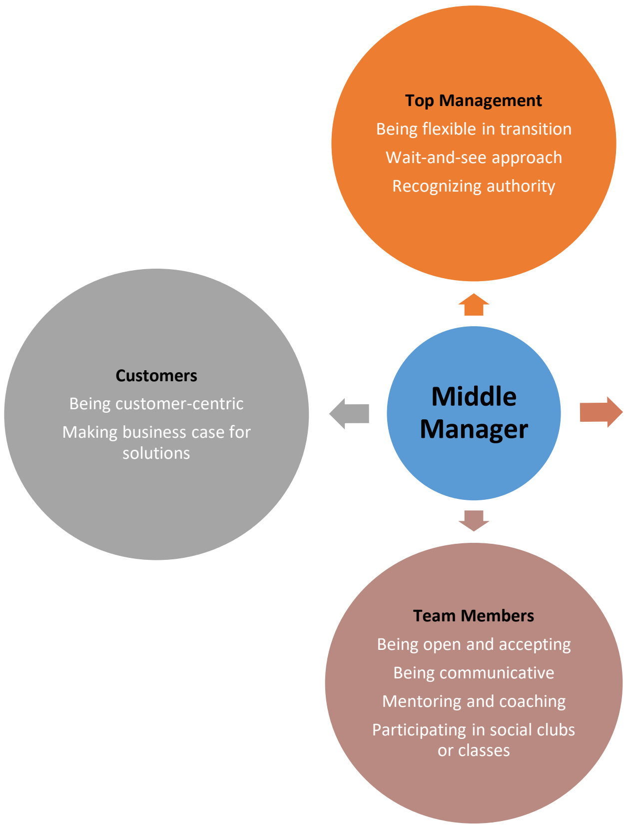
coaching were used extensively to build a culture of beliefs and practices among the whole organization. The culture was further reinforced by the new initiatives of Lean Sigma in process improvement and problem solving. Leadership-as-practice under the Six Sigma paradigm was “to trust in science, not in experience.” The leaders and the teams should share similar concepts and believe that solutions or improvements could come about with proper and effective methodology. The leaders first needed to empower the team to identify the problem, and to find solutions based on precise data collection and analysis. The leaders should be able to put aside their past perceptions and past experiences, which could be a help or a barrier to finding the solutions.

The Relationship Management Practice

The relationship management practice was brought about by those changes in the business environment as well as in the organization. The MMs were required to manage the relationships with their customers, their top management, their peer managers, and their team members (Figure 5.12). The MMs, in response to those changes as outlined in Figure 5.12, managed their relationships with the customers by being customer-centric, with their top management by recognizing the new leaders, with their peer managers by fostering social support and managing conflicts directly, and with their team members by cultivating active staff engagement. Acceptance and recognition of the new top leadership could be a leadership practice that the MMs had to do in relationship management during leadership transition. The *good relationship among the B5+1* in turn seemed to help foster a harmonious working environment at RSX-SZ. At least they could talk and resolve whatever issues were related to the business, without second-guessing what the other person was up to. *Clarifying and managing conflicts directly* with their peer managers was a leadership practice among the B5+1. For instance, during lunch time one day, Judy was talking to David about an issue that she thought David could have spoken to her about directly, instead of talking to Joseph, who

Figure 5.12

Relationship Management Practice of the MMs



in turn seemed to blame her about the issue. David knew that Judy was very upset, and he tried to explain the situation. The other two DHs and I were present at the lunch table and heard the conversation between Judy and David. They did not say anything, but they were listening attentively with care.

This was different from other organizations I have seen which literally were at war when the two department heads did not get along with each other. The harmonious working relationship among the DHs might well be one of the main engagement factors, if not motivation factors, for their team members at RSX-SZ. As an employee put it, “We stay largely because of the good social relationship at RSX-SZ despite the relatively low salaries they offered.”

The Communication and Coordination Practice

Communication and coordination as a leadership practice could be the most fundamental and yet often neglected work among leaders. Many organizational changes have good purpose and intent, but they were poorly communicated and coordinated by the top leaders and the middle managers, who were put in charge of such change initiatives. Last, but not the least, communication and coordination, like relationship management, is always a two-way traffic, that is, both the leaders and the team members need to communicate and adapt to the change or challenge together.

Figure 5.13

Communication and Coordination Practice of the MMs

In Figure 5.13, the communication and coordination practice were applied in the MMs' interactions and dialogues with the top management, their peer managers, and their team members. The MMs' practices focused on informing and supporting the top management, collaborating with peer managers for performance excellence, and motivating and coaching team members for change management effectiveness and staff engagement purposes.

Continuous Learning as a Personal Value to Drive Leadership-as-Practice

Leadership-as-practice could be activated or stimulated by external changes; it could also be driven by intrinsic motivation and personal value. It was observed that the MMs were motivated very much by personal growth and continuous learning, which in turn drive their leadership-as-practice in leading change. All of B5+1 liked to learn new things, and they seemed to take organizational and career changes as challenges as well as opportunities for their personal learning and growth. Some DHs mentioned that they needed to learn the new technology and issues of the new operations as fast as possible, so that they could become competent to lead and manage the teams. However, some of those technical tasks could not be easily learned and mastered by the DHs, even though they might be coming from a similar technical background, not to mention the ones who did not have the necessary technical knowledge and experience. Personal learning became both a necessity as well as a motivating factor for leading change and career development.

For instance, the Operation Director, David, took up two more floors of operations, which he was not familiar with, but he could learn and pick up those new operations in six months. Learning in itself became a source of motivation to David. Many years ago he even took up overseas assignments to work in RSX Morocco and RSX Philippines. Though the working experience might be very difficult, he enjoyed the challenge and learning from the overseas assignments.

The QPP Director, Judy, indicated that she needed to learn the process and product engineering issues, so that she could understand what her team members were talking about. She realized that her new team members might not accept her as their new leader simply because of her lack of technical engineering knowledge and experience. However, she believed that at least she could offer her perspectives from quality assurance and management point of view. She worked extra-hard to master those technical matters while she was empowering her technical teams to do their work, and she also relied on Joseph to support her in her transition.

The EHS, Security, and Audit Director, Rose, needed to learn about EHS and security issues two years ago when she first took up the job. More recently, she needed to take up the audit work of their industry certifications. This year the corporate office has pushed corporate social responsibility (CSR) concepts and practices in their production and their facility management. Rose and her team had to learn more about energy savings and other CSR issues. Rose told me that she liked to try different lines of work because she could learn new things. She could become bored by her job if she had nothing more to learn.

The Supply Chain Director, Mary, focused her learning on personal wellness, philosophy, and coaching, after she had experienced her health crisis last year. Being healthy and happy had become the most important thing to her now. She tried her best to do her job and to develop her successors in her department to take up the leadership roles. Mary was the only DH who came regularly for the badminton games. While she played to win the game, she also tried to enjoy herself and have fun with other staff members. Her value of life might well affect her learning, her sports, and her work.

Based on my conversations with the DHs and some employees who were impacted by the organizational changes, they felt that continuous learning helped them manage the changes and challenges during transition. More specifically, their ability to learn and to grow from the change experience could determine how effectively they responded to changes. According to the DHs and staff interviewed, they usually learned by reading books, by observing other leaders, and by talking with the experts and experienced staff. According to a N-2 manager, learning had helped him see and adapt to changes with positive mindset and actions. A DH also expressed that he continued to take on new roles and challenges despite the tough working environment at RSX-SZ without regret, because he had felt that he was learning and growing. Learning gave him the motivation and energy to lead and manage change!

While change was constant at work, the DHs seemed to adjust and adapt to those challenges at work very well, based on their personal values and career aspirations. The DHs might feel that there was nothing much they could do to change corporate decisions about the direction and policies of their organization. Continuous improvement and learning seemed to give them the empowerment and sense of control over their work and their career.

Social Support Network Among the B5+1

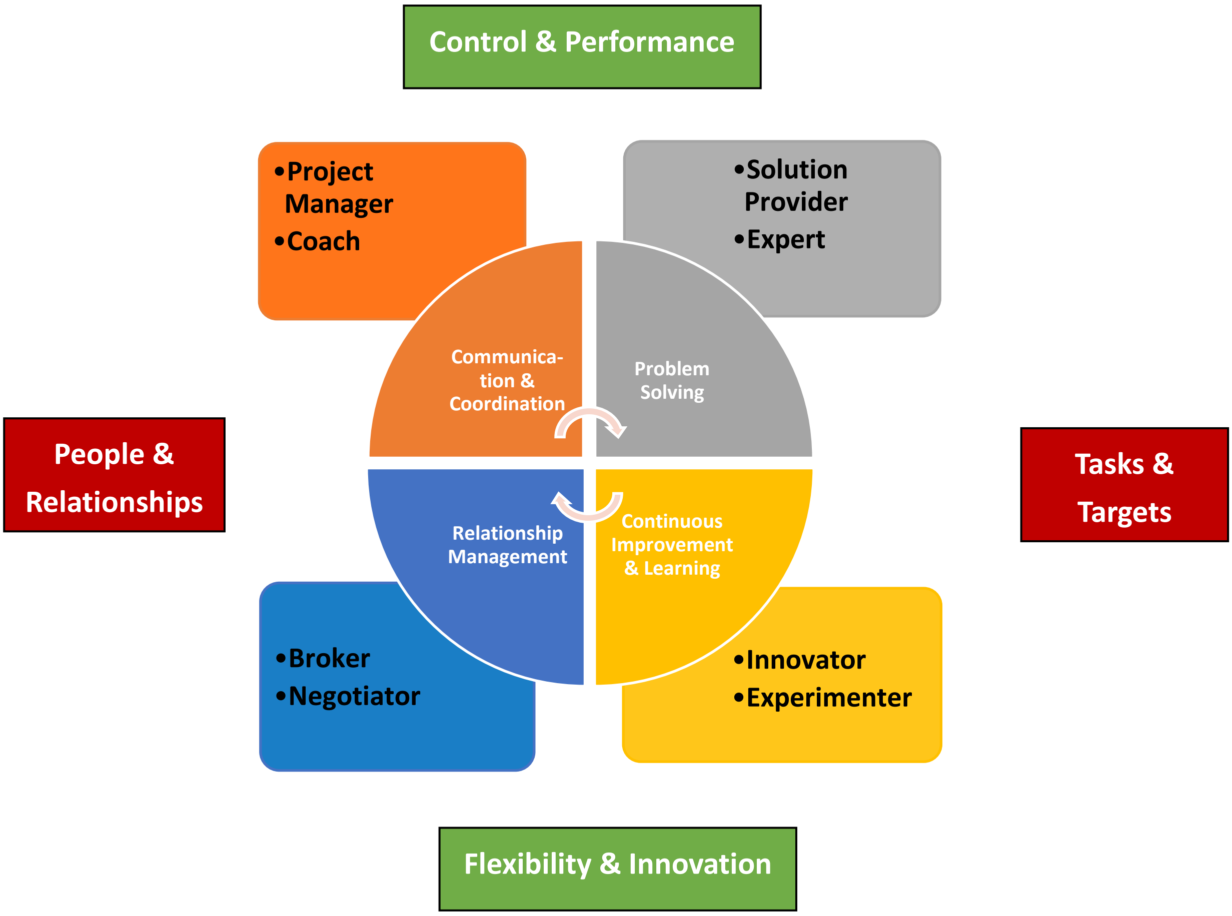
Among the B5+1, they had been colleagues and friends for years. They could talk and laugh during lunch time and teatime. One DH told me that the B5+1 became good friends and they gathered during lunch time only two years ago. According to the DH, they sometimes felt very distressed and frustrated with the management team, particularly when Alex was challenging them in general or scolding one of them about some operational or business issues. The group had become a source of support and comfort to them. One DH said in front of the other B5+1 during a lunch gathering, “I talked about personal things to this group which I would not talk about in other social groups.” Social support among peer managers seemed to become a catalyst to the middle management of RSX-SZ in leading change as well as a positive energy for personal resilience in the midst of all the challenges happening around them in the organization and in their personal lives.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have described the three major changes that the MMs had experienced in their organization and the processes that the organization had developed as responses to those changes. Those processes had in turn activated the four major leadership-as-practices of the MMs in leading their organizational changes at RSX-SZ during those six months under my study. Problem solving, continuous improvement and learning, relationship management, and communication and coordination were the essential practices that I had seen among the MMs. The model of leadership-as-practice derived from this study is different from the step model leadership practice of MMs in leading organizational change (Kotter, 1995; Lewin, 1947). The practices were not linear such as visioning, communicating, and implementing; it was more of a spiral or circular process depending on the different scenarios or contexts that the MMs needed to manage at that moment. Change involved process and time; process activated leadership-as-practice. Their LAP reflected different roles in different contexts (see Figure 5.14).

Figure 5.14

Roles of the MMs in Leadership-as-Practice



In Figure 5.14, the processes of leading change in multinational setting involved the corporate office, the top management, the MMs, the respective teams, and external stakeholders. Firstly, the MMs acted very much as the *brokers* or *negotiators* in relationship management, particularly in dealing with customers, corporate office personnel, and other stake holders in the business environment. Internally, they also needed to bridge the relationships between top management and their team members as well as to negotiate with their peer managers and team members for support and engagement. Secondly, the MMs functioned as *project managers* or *coaches* in their communication and coordination practice with top management, other departments, and their team members, to monitor the progress and to solicit their support in production plans, problem solving, or continuous improvement projects. Thirdly, the MMs became the *solution providers* or *experts* in problem solving while they worked together with their top management, other peer managers, and team members to resolve the problems. Fourthly, in continuous improvement and learning practice, the MMs seemed to act in the roles of *innovators* or *experimenters* to learn and develop new and better ways of doing things.

Last but not the least, the MMs strived to be the *resilient leaders* in the eyes of the top management and their team members, as well as for their personal well-being. They practiced personal resilience in their leadership roles and became a role model to their team members by accepting change as a challenge, making sense of the change situations with positivity, and focusing on continuous learning and improvising in their work and individual lives. The personal value of growth and learning at work became a motivation to them in accepting and leading change. The social support and friendship of their peer managers also gave them emotional comfort and companionship to maintain balance and persevere in the waves of change. Enjoying work and enjoying life seemed to be a motto for most of the DHs. Change was a process, and it was only part of life.

In the concluding chapter, I will integrate the findings from my ethnographic study with the theoretical origins and other empirical studies about LAP of MMs. I will then attempt based on my new findings to construct a LAP model of MMs in leading organizational change. I will also discuss the contributions and significance of the new findings and the LAP model. Finally, I will describe the limitations of this study and recommendations to further research opportunities.

CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION, MODELING, AND IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical frameworks are the foundations of any theory or practice model. Theories in leadership and management could be developed from empirical data collected from research subjects of different levels of leadership and management, or of different cultures and industries. It is an essential task for researchers to validate those theoretical perspectives with the new data collected through different methodologies. In the past, most of the empirical evidence was generated from quantitative research based on positivist epistemological assumptions and only in recent decade qualitative research findings have been recognized and valued as empirical evidence for theory building or theoretical validations.

In Chapter II, I outlined the theoretical origins of this study and reviewed the existing LAP empirical studies. In Chapter III, I argued that organizational ethnography was the appropriate research method for studying the LAP of MMs who engaged in organizational change in multinational setting. I then described the immersion process as a tale of my organizational ethnography in Chapter IV. In Chapter V, I analyzed and presented the changes, processes, and practices based on the ethnographic data collected in the 6-month study at the research site. I also articulated the practices and roles of the MMs under study. In this chapter I will firstly discuss how the findings of this ethnographic study relate to those three theoretical frameworks (collective leadership, change management, and LAP). I will highlight what the new findings are and how those findings may influence theory building and leadership practice. Secondly, I will attempt to construct the LAP Leading Change Model for MMs in leading organizational change by integrating the four main leadership practices (relationship management, communication and coordination, problem solving, and continuous improvement and learning) with existing theories and empirical studies. Thirdly, I will discuss the contributions and the implications of this study. Finally, I will point out the limitations of this study and recommend further research to expand the knowledge of LAP of MMs.

Discussion on the Three Theoretical Perspectives and New Findings

In the following section I will examine the basic concepts of the three theoretical perspectives—collective leadership, change management, and leadership-as-practice—and highlight some similarities and differences in the findings of my organizational ethnography.

Collective Leadership

The findings of this study seem to affirm leadership as a plural process (that is, collective leadership; Denis et al., 2012). More specifically, this ethnographic study shows that leadership has individual, group, and organization elements, and they intertwine and influence each other, and that their relationship is not linear. Leadership is more in the "plural" sense than in the "singular," and it involves dynamic interactions with forces of the team, organization, and environment contexts. Although the study has shown the two different leadership styles of Alex and Joseph, the leadership practice of both top leaders involved the whole management team, corporate office personnel, and the organization. Many strategic decisions were top-down, but the execution of those decisions by the leadership team at RSX-SZ was very much based on teamwork or collective leadership. The execution process involved relationship management, communication and coordination, problem solving, and continuous improvement and learning among the top management, the middle management, and the frontline team members.

Ospina et al. (2020) argued that collective leadership could be further defined based on “locus of leadership” and “view of collectivity” (p. 443). The findings of my study confirm my definition of collective leadership in Chapter II , that is, collective leadership residing in the group (interaction and dialogue) and collective leadership as lens (socially constructed by the leader and the team members). Joseph was trying to establish a collective or participative leadership in the management team. He involved the DHs in problem solving, communication, and continuous improvement processes as a leadership team, instead of singling out himself as the new autocratic leader after Alex. Likewise, the DHs asserted their leadership with empowerment and delegation to their direct reports and depended on them to find solutions to problems and to deliver production outcomes. Moreover, the implementation of the Lean Sigma methodology and the P-FMEA (Process-Failure Mode and Effects Analysis) in the production was to rely on the system and process as leadership instead of the leader only. The team members or the followers had definite influence on the collective leadership in their relationship management of the new DHs and ultimately in their engagement with the organization, that is, whether they would stay or not.

Change Management

A characteristic of MNCs is their corporate cultures and how they interact and sometimes collide with the local national cultures. I did not see such cultural conflicts at RSX-SZ during my ethnographic presence and observation. It was organizational change, leadership change, and personnel change that affected how the MMs interacted and dialogued with the top management, their peers, and their team members. Their leadership-as-practice was mainly involved their responses to those changes in the organization, their departments, and teams.

Strategic planning and execution are often portrayed as the most essential leadership and change management skill in modern organizations (Floyd et al., 2011; Floyd & Wooldridge, 2017; Kownatzki et al., 2013; Wooldridge et al., 2008). In a manufacturing site of an MNC located in the Asia Pacific region, such as RSX-SZ, strategic planning and execution seems to carry a very different meaning because the macro and meso level changes, as I tried to describe earlier in Chapter V, could impact the organization so much so that the top or middle management could not really do anything about those changes, except adapt to those changes with effective problem solving, greater operation efficiency, and ahead-of-market innovation. Strategies and demands were driven by the corporate office and the markets. The top leaders and the MMs of RSX-SZ seldom questioned why or the vision for change because in most of the situations, they did not have any choice. So, there was not much of strategic planning apart from how to execute the decisions and policies of the corporate office, or how to meet the demands of the customers concerning their products in the light of performance and quality. The MMs were more concerned about operational questions such as what, how, when, where, who, and how much. Their leadership-as-practice was applied in those contexts and for those purposes. They focused on the practical matters, which they were responsible for, and they could do something about.

Lee (1994) pointed out that the change leader role and the operation manager role for MMs could be very confusing in driving organizational change. On the one hand, MMs, as operation managers, are required to ensure efficiency and stability in production and service operations. On the other hand, they are expected to play the role of change leaders in leading change and promoting risk taking. In my study I certainly could identify such confusion in roles among the MMs and it was a delicate balance that they had to manage during organizational change. Such differences between the two roles were blended together when the MMs were involved in communication and coordination, problem solving, and continuous improvement and learning leadership practices. The Supply Chain Director needed to deal with the supply challenges brought about by the US-China trade wars and bans on high-tech products. While her main concern was to maintain a stable and cost competitive supply of parts for production, Wendy needed to work with her teams to be innovative and to take risks in sourcing the necessary parts for the scheduled production. The Operation Director was responsible to produce all the products at the highest quality required while he needed to proactively prepare for future changes brought about by technological changes and market forces. Likewise, under the Lean Sigma and the continuous improvement approaches, to maintain efficiency is to make change effectively for the whole organization. To the MMs, leading change was a necessity and a process to solve problems.

In Chapter II, I reviewed what critiques change management literature has made about Kotter's leading change process (1996) and the step model. My study showed that the organization had applied the process of visioning, communicating, and implementing, but the visioning part was carried out mainly by the top management. At the middle management level, the DHs were responsible for communication and coordination among the departments and their team members to execute the strategic decisions or plans imposed by the corporate office or the top management.

Visioning in the operational context might well be perceived as problem solving; defining the problem and finding the appropriate solution was the visioning to the MMs and their team members. The leaders and operational staff met together to deal with different customer complaints and operational issues. The first thing that the leader usually did was to tell the team what the problems were, such as the printing quality problem or the semiconductor defects problem presented in Chapter V. The team then worked together to define the causes of the problem and to find the solutions with clear purpose and high efficiency. Their vision was to solve the problem effectively and efficiently. Visions were usually communicated in terms of data, targets, and charts.

The communication about changes or problems was usually done in the management meetings, team briefings, and the War Room. Joseph, as the top leader, did not talk much in large group settings to convey his visions for the company; he communicated to the DHs and the middle managers/supervisors in small teams, by urging them to innovate and improve in performance and quality. Then, he worked with the DHs and the teams to execute those plans or to solve some technical or task and target problems together. The MMs also communicated with the top management, their peer managers, and their team members in small teams or in one-on-one dialogues.

Then, the implementation stage was very much a continuous improvement and learning process. The belief and practice of quality assurance and continuous improvement were built into the corporate culture of RSX-SZ. The new PD had made decisive attempts to strengthen those beliefs and practices through Lean Sigma and other corporate training and development programs.

Change is more of a spiral or circular—a complicated, dynamic, and sometimes chaotic process; it is not as linear as Kotter's model describes. The leadership transition of the top leaders was one example of such spiral process. The top management did not just announce vision for leadership change, communicate about the change process, and then implement the change according to the vision and plan; they were exploring what the right thing to do, when the right timing was for handover, and whom they could work with as their successors and N-2 leaders. Before they knew it, there were unexpected personnel changes in the teams, and they had to manage the contingencies and business continuity instead of leadership transition and succession planning. My ethnographic study showed that change management could be a dynamic process at the organizational, team, and individual levels.

Leadership-as-Practice

Leadership-as-practice, as a theoretical perspective, advocates a social construction of reality that emphasizes language, dialogue, and the process of interactions among the leaders, the followers, and the other significant parties under a particular organizational and cultural context (Carsten et al., 2010; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Ford, 2015). In the following paragraphs I will discuss how my research findings confirm or differ from the leadership-as-practice theories and empirical studies.

Adaptive Leadership Practice. My research findings agree with the concepts and practice of adaptive leadership theory (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Heifetz et al., 2009), which is about how leaders encourage people to adapt by rightfully identifying the problem and finding the adaptive solutions to those problems. Adaptive leadership practice includes going up to the balcony, thinking politically, orchestrating the conflict, giving the work back to the stakeholders, holding steady, and building an adaptive culture.

Both Joseph and most of the DHs under my study demonstrated those adaptative leadership practices in leading the organizational changes in the company. Though Heifetz developed his adaptive leadership theory from the government organizational setting, those practices seemed to be applicable in MNC manufacturing organizations as well. Sometimes, the PD or the DHs could make decisions in problem solving, but they usually gave the work back to the concerned team leaders to find the appropriate solutions. The Lean Sigma training and projects reflected exactly those adaptive leadership practices, particularly the last one about building an adaptive (or Lean Sigma) culture.

Boundary Spanning Leadership Practice. However, my findings only partially confirm the general concepts and some of the practices of boundary spanning leadership (Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2011). According to the boundary spanning leadership theory, DAC are essential elements for successful organizational changes (Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2011, p. 10). The DAC might be the ideal conditions of an organization in leading change. The MNCs have their strategic planning and decision-making at the corporate or regional level. When those decisions are communicated to the local level, they usually mean final and nonnegotiable. It is not up to the local top and middle management to influence the corporate decision makers because, in the MNC hierarchy, their roles and responsibilities are to execute the decisions and policies of the corporate office. That was certainly true for RSX-SZ in my study. At best, DAC could be compliance and commitment to solve the problems and to execute corporate policies.

The local management team of RSX-SZ never questioned the top management's decisions. They could not even talk to the customers directly without the mediation of the business development team, who was usually located in other regions or countries. The plant only took orders and then delivered the products according to the agreed schedules, specifications, volumes, and quality assurance standards. The plant was like the army on the field to do whatever the commander or headquarters ordered them to do. The DAC of the local teams did not seem to be a concern to the corporate decision makers. Sometimes, the corporate office seemed to show little concern about the tough situations of the local site such as high staff turnover or manpower shortage; they seemed to care about the Key Performance Indicators or their corporate business objectives only.

For instance, when RSX-SZ experienced exceptionally high staff turnover in March and April among the support functional departments, the local management could only live with the problems and manage the transitions to the best of their abilities and resources available. Performance management (in terms of cost control) and staff retention seemed to be a dilemma that the MMs felt helpless and powerless to resolve. Most of the MMs had to juggle with headcounts and salary figures to meet both the corporate requirements and the expectations of the team members. They needed to retain the necessary talent and manpower for the production and operation, but they sometimes felt helpless in providing their staff with reasonable and good salaries or promotion opportunities. One DH said to me, "Lean and mean could become thin and weak! And I could not do anything about that."

Ernst and Chrobot-Mason (2011) argued that the six practices of boundary spanning leadership to create the nexus effect include: buffering (creating safety), reflecting (fostering respect), connecting (building trust), mobilizing (developing community), weaving (advancing interdependence), and transforming (enabling reinvention). In Chapter V, I described the four main leadership practices of the MMs, namely, problem solving, continuous improvement and learning, relationship management, and communication and coordination. The six practices of the boundary spanning leadership theory according to Ernst and Chrobot-Mason focus more on the relational aspects of the organization; they do not deal with the operational processes and problem-solving work that MMs need to manage, particularly in a manufacturing business environment. My leadership-as-practice model, which addresses both tasks and relationships, seems to be more comprehensive, applicable, and relevant to the MNC and manufacturing settings.

Practices Revealed by Empirical Studies. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) suggested from their findings, a rethinking of leadership, taking the mundane, almost trivial, aspects of what managers actually do, seriously. They further asserted that leadership, after all, might not be so necessary when the managers were working with highly competent knowledge workers. In contrast, my study showed that even among highly competent knowledge workers (process and product engineers, quality assurance managers, IT, HR, and finance staff), they preferred their MMs to have strong technical competencies and good people management practices. More specifically, some of those highly competent knowledge workers longed for individual coaching by their MMs on their technical and professional knowledge as well as their career development paths. They became disappointed when their leaders failed to provide technical guidance and career development opportunities for them. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) might be looking at those autonomous designers or software engineers, who were commissioned to take on project and work out the solutions or products, independently. That could be the reason why those knowledge workers did not like to be bothered or supervised by their MMs. However, the research site was a manufacturing setting, and the work units were working inter-dependently with other departments. Any mistakes could cost the company a great fortune and severe consequences to their careers. Those team members could naturally want to get specific guidance and coaching from their MMs.

Azambuja and Islam (2019) used organizational ethnography as their research approach to observe the lived experience of MMs of a Brazilian accounting firm. They found that MMs described themselves as proactive and reflexive agents, on the one hand, yet also as lacking autonomy and a sense of belonging, on the other. Their study concluded that MMs routinely shifted between being agential and reflexive mediators (boundary subjects) and being interfacing and coordination devices (boundary objects). My organizational ethnography employed similar methods such as shadowing and interviews, apart from direct observation of the MMs in their meetings and even lunch conversations.

My findings, however, showed that the MMs were mainly reacting to changes and challenges that were brought about by organizational change, leadership change, and personnel change. Their "proactiveness" was mainly driven by the changes in the production schedules, and therefore, by the needs of maintaining production capacities and performance. The "reflexivity" part could be related to their problem solving and continuous improvement work. The MMs under study did exhibit a sense of lacking in autonomy because there were many things that were beyond their control, including their roles and responsibilities. Their resilience and sense of belonging to the organization and to the teams (including the B5+1 social group) seemed to provide a good support and balance to those negative emotions.

The MMs did shift their roles as Azambuja and Islam (2019) described between being agential and reflexive mediators (boundary subjects) and being interfacing and coordination devices (boundary objects). Those roles were applied and shifted in the leading change and problem-solving processes. Moreover, my findings revealed that the MMs acted in the roles of solution-provider/expert, innovator/experimenter, broker/negotiator, and project manager/coach in their LAP.

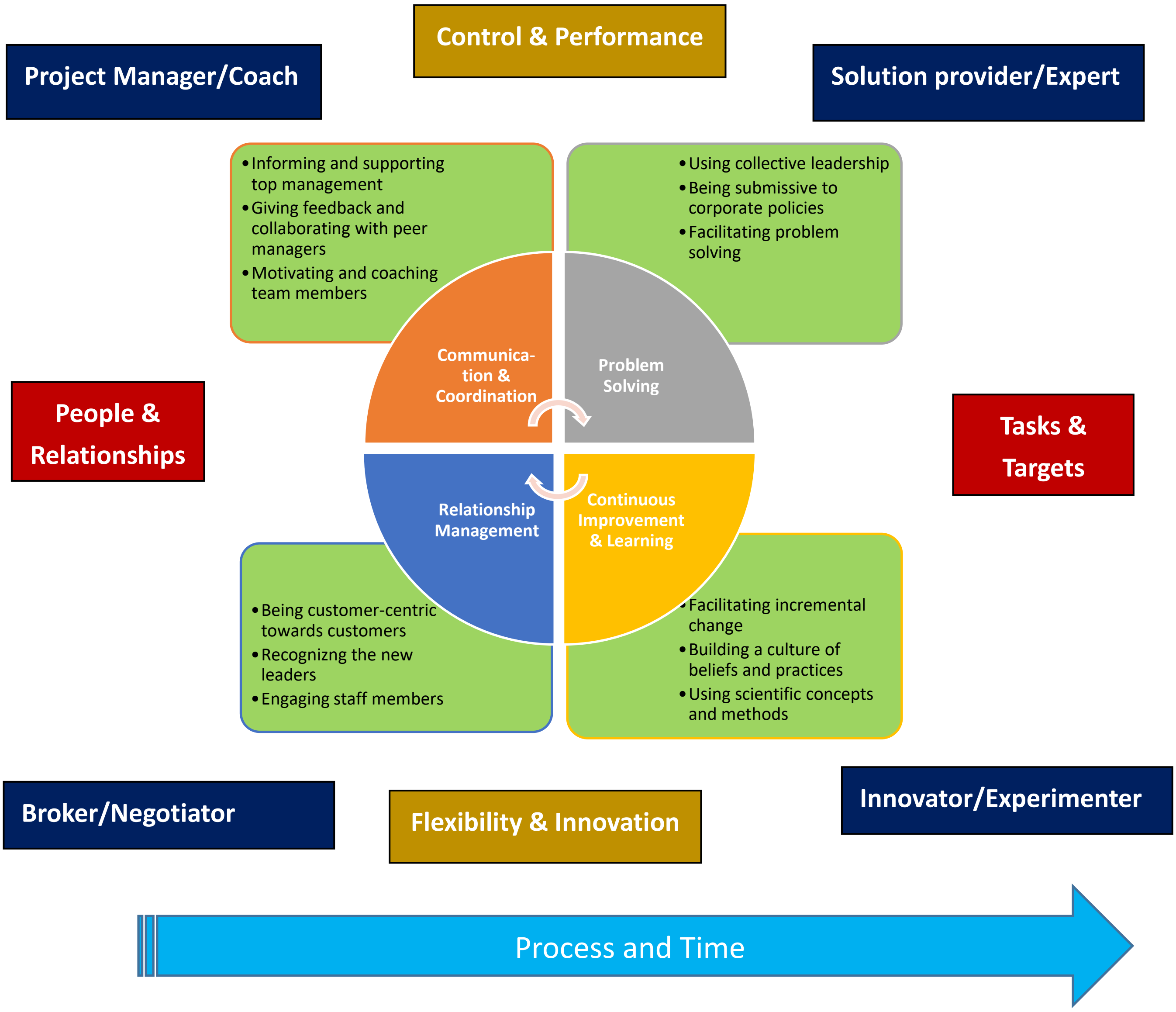
Construction of the LAP Leading Change Model of MMs

Based on the above integration and application of past theories and empirical studies on leadership and change management, and with the data of my organizational ethnography, I will seek to construct a LAP Leading Change Model of MMs as outlined in Figure 5.15. The LAP of MMs is influenced by the macro and meso level changes in the business environment. Leadership-as-practice of MMs is exercised in the context of process and time. The organizational change, leadership change and the subsequent transition, and the personnel change evolved through time and history of the organization, team, and individual levels. Those changes did not just happen; they came about through a process and time. Likewise, when the MMs were trying to deal with those changes in the organization and teams, they attempted different leadership practices as I had described in Chapter V and those practices created different impacts in the process of time. MMs are to respond to the processes initiated by the organization in response to the external and internal changes with their LAP. The core of their LAP in leading change consists of the four main practices, namely, problem solving, continuous improvement and learning, relationship management, and communication and coordination. Figure 5.15 depicts these practices as the core circle of the figure. For each leadership-as-practice, I will further elaborate the purpose and focus of that practice under the contexts of MNC and Asia Pacific region.

Problem-solving, (see Figure 5.15 top right quadrant) as a leadership practice, seems like common sense, but doing it right and doing it scientifically instead of based on MMs' past experience or judgment is not easy. Middle managers need to become adaptive leaders to work with the stakeholders and to allow time to facilitate the problem-solving process. They

Figure 5.15

LAP Leading Change Model for MMs



should endeavor to provide the holding environment for the concerned parties to identify the real and significant causes of the problem, and to find the appropriate solutions to the problem. Implementing the solutions requires MMs to do a lot of negotiation and influencing work with the stakeholders and the decision makers before they mobilize their teams to implement the solutions as agreed by the decision makers. In the meantime, MMs could play the roles of *solution provider or expert* (see Figure 5.15 top right corner in blue) in providing technical solutions to their stakeholders whenever necessary because many problems in manufacturing settings are technical problems after all.

Continuous improvement and learning (see Figure 5.15 bottom right quadrant) has different meanings at organizational, team, and individual levels in leadership-as-practice. At the organization level, MMs need to build an adaptive culture with open sharing of information and best practice among the members of the organization and outside the organization. Middle managers should, by all means, encourage curiosity and innovation so that the teams constantly rethink the possibilities of process improvement and team learning, from being customer-centric, problem solving, and quality assurance situations. At the end, MMs are determined and committed to transforming the organization, team, and individual practice. They will act in the roles of *innovator or experimenter* (see Figure 5.15 bottom right corner in blue) to be role-models to the others in adapting innovation.

Relationship management (see Figure 5.15 bottom left quadrant) requires MMs to be customer centric to the customers and corporate decision makers, good team players to their peers, and effective people managers in relation to their team members. Middle managers need to manage leadership transition above as well as below in the hierarchy, during organizational change. As people managers, MMs also need to be mindful of staff engagement issues during leadership transition and team transition. Here, MMs act as *brokers/negotiators* (see Figure 5.15 bottom left corner in blue) to develop trust and respect as well as collaboration and teamwork among the stakeholders.

Communication and coordination (see Figure 5.15 top left quadrant), as a leadership practice, focuses on control and performance. Middle managers need to establish different channels to communicate and coordinate organizational change issues and routine operational issues with their significant others in the organization. In relation to the top management, MMs need to inform and support the leaders in driving the new business objectives and in managing organizational changes. In their interactions and dialogues with their team members, though MMs might not talk about visioning as much as the top leaders do, they need to make the visions for change meaningful and relevant to their team members. Middle managers may talk more about the “why” to their team members instead of just focusing on the “how” and “what” questions in leading organizational change. Lastly, all communication and coordination leadership practices should aim at execution, to deliver the final change outcomes or business results with helpful feedback and collaboration with the peer managers and their respective departments. To lead change, MMs need to play the roles of *project managers/coaches* (see Figure 5.15 top left corner in blue) to make sure that things get done according to the plans.

Finally, the *process and time* perspective reminds MMs to lead and manage change as a dynamic process instead of static moments. In the process of change, there could be leadership moments in which all the concerned parties and stakeholders work together, take the ownership of the change or problem, and execute the change plan or solution to the problem, together in collective leadership. I saw those leadership moments at RSX-SZ during my ethnography in the War Room, August tea reception, and conference rooms where the PD, the DHs, and the other team members were solving problems together.

Contributions and Implications of the Study

Middle managers play important roles in leading organizational change, but they are often regarded by the top management at the corporate office as insignificant in the strategic planning process; the top management only expect MMs to execute their strategic change plans. The success or failure of organizational change, to some of those top management executives, might only depend on their visions and strategies for their business units. They pay very little attention to involving the middle management in formulating their visions and strategies. Similarly, leadership development programs for MMs often focused on their normal operational and people management tasks without consideration of the different situations of organizational changes. Finally, when MNCs communicate and implement organizational changes at the local levels, they could just expect the local management to follow their plans and targets with no questions asked. They pay very little or no attention to the Asia Pacific cultural contexts in leading organizational changes.

This ethnographic study has contributed several important new findings to leadership and management studies:

1. Middle managers played significant roles in communication and execution in leading organizational changes. They are the keys to problem-solving, continuous improvement and learning, relationship management, and communication and coordination work during organizational changes.
2. Middle managers, team members, or the followers had definite influence on the collective leadership in their relationship management of the new leaderships in the organization and ultimately in their engagement with the organization, that is, whether they would stay or not.
3. My study showed that change management could be a dynamic process at the organizational, team, and individual levels. It is not linear, and the stage-model might not apply to the middle management.

4. My research findings agree with the concepts and practice of adaptive leadership theory, which is about how leaders encourage people to adapt by rightfully identifying the problem and finding the adaptive solutions to those problems.
5. My leadership-as-practice model with four main practices (problem solving, continuous improvement and learning, relationship management, and communication and coordination) seems to be more comprehensive, applicable, and relevant to the MNC and manufacturing settings.
6. My findings showed that MMs were mainly reacting to changes and challenges that were brought about by organizational change, leadership change, and personnel change. Their proactiveness might relate to problem solving and process improvement work.
7. My findings revealed that MMs acted in the roles of solution-provider/expert, innovator/experimenter, broker/negotiator, and project manager/coach in their LAP.
8. The personal value of growth and learning at work became a motivation to them in accepting and leading change. The social support and friendship of their peer managers also gave them emotional comfort and companionship to maintain balance and persevere in the waves of change.

In the following sections, I will discuss the implications of the findings and the LAP

Leading Change Model to strategic planning and leading organizational change, leadership development of MMs in leading organizational change, and practicing leadership during organizational change under the Asia Pacific cultural context.

Involving MMs in Strategic Planning and Leading Organizational Changes

Usually, the beginning of a major organizational change starts with a new CEO, who has a new vision and strategic plan for the company. The CEO works out the strategic plans together with several core executives at the board of directors level or executive team level. Then, the CEO goes on the roadshows communicating to the shareholders, investors, customers, and eventually to the internal organization. The internal communication could take the form of town hall meetings or global conference calls whereby the division heads, country managers, and perhaps some local senior executives could have a direct dialogue with the CEO concerning the new vision and strategies as well as the subsequent organizational changes. When the waves of organizational changes finally come to the local sites, MMs are just being informed about the organizational changes and they are expected to just do it. When MMs voice out their concerns and questions, their top management might simply reply, “Don’t tell me about problems; give me solutions!” The corporate office usually has the big picture and key performance indicators (KPIs) in mind, and they often care less about local concerns and problems.

In my transformational leadership training workshop, I asked the business leaders, "Which is the most resistant group in organizational changes? Top management, middle managers, or frontline staff?" The business leaders often said, "The middle managers!" It is not a surprise, but many top management still do not realize that they need to gain the buy-in of MMs in driving organizational changes, and that failure to do so might bring about failures in change management.

The LAP Leading Change Model of MMs might offer some insights to the top management leaders on how to engage their MMs in leading organizational change, as early as possible, in strategic planning and execution of their strategic plans. Middle managers are the important links to the whole organization. If they do not trust or understand the strategic plans and the organizational changes, they will not be able to execute those plans as the top management expect them to do. Therefore, relationship management and communication and coordination practices, as outlined in the LAP Leading Change Model, should begin with the top management. Middle managers deserve greater respect and trust from the corporate executives and the local top management because they are the ones to do the execution work. Ignoring MMs in leading organizational change is to set up for resistance and failures.

My ethnographic study showed that MMs played vital roles in problem solving, handling customer complaints, and facilitating innovation in process improvements. They were the ones who understood the problems and the production operations inside-out. The local top management whether Alex or Joseph needed to depend on the MMs to get things done and to motivate their team members. The corporate office of RSX-SZ had insisted on their HR or finance policies without due considerations of the local retention challenges. Subsequently, there was unexpected high staff turnover in the beginning of 2020. Of course, from the perspective of the corporate office, their KPIs were still achieved, but at the local level, it was the MMs who were struggling with those retention issues with the tight budgets and policies imposed on them from the corporate office. The turnover problem might have been solved with the aggressive recruitment of new staff at the prescribed budgets. RSX-SX still needed to face the problems of sustainability and staff engagement in the long run.

Leadership Development of MMs for Leading Organizational Changes

The LAP Model has implications for leadership development in MNCs. Most MNCs have their corporate leadership development programs, which very often are based on their leadership competencies models. Those leadership competencies are developed by well-known consulting firms or tailor-made designs for the MNCs. However, most of those leadership development programs are catered for normal time and not for organizational changes. There could be one competency called "change management" among top management leadership competencies. At the middle management, the focus of leadership development often is on problem solving, execution, and people management.

Those are essential competencies for MMs but leading in normal time is vastly different from leading organizational change. Of course, now there is no such thing as normal time anymore because this is a VUCA world and change is the only constant. While the content of the leadership development programs might still be the same, the context of leadership practice is different. The LAP Leading Change Model of MMs could offer some inspirations to the leadership development designers of MNCs.

The leadership development of MMs for leading organizational change may focus firstly on understanding the macro and meso level changes, which directly or indirectly have brought about the organizational change. The organizational change, leadership change, and personnel change were the contextual issues impacting on RSX-SZ, which the MMs needed to understand and manage. The four LAPs could be the core components of the leadership development program. The concepts and methods of collective leadership and adaptive leadership could be included in the introduction part of the leadership development program, so that MMs could understand what they are going to do and why they are doing it in collective leadership and adaptive leadership practices.

Finally, problem solving, continuous improvement and learning, relationship management, and communication and coordination practices could be introduced by case studies and project assignments just like the Lean Sigma training approach. The interactions and dialogues of those LAPs could only be learned through observation learning, behavioral practice, and timely feedback in role-play exercises and case studies. Finally, individual coaching could be used to help MMs apply their newly learned LAP in their real-life work situations.

Practicing Leading Change With Sensitivity to the Asia Pacific Cultural Contexts

Lastly, in Chapter I, I pointed out the importance of culture, organization, and cross-cultural leadership. Though this ethnographic study did not go into in-depth discussions about cross-cultural implications for leadership practice in a multinational setting, the LAP Model points towards the need of practicing leading change in the Asia Pacific cultural contexts. Many people think that the Asia Pacific cultures tend to be more submissive, and the people are quiet about their responses towards organizational changes. That is true to a certain extent, but the top management of MNCs should not take it for granted that their local management and staff in Asia Pacific will automatically support or submit to their change initiatives. The Chinese workers of the research site might not say anything about organizational change, but if they did not like the change, they just walked away.

Respect and *care* are two important elements in Asia Pacific cultures. The top management as well as MMs must be careful in communicating change to their staff in Asia Pacific with respect and care. My ethnographic study showed that the MMs were careful to show their recognition and respect for their new PD while at the same time the new PD was careful to give autonomy and respect to the leadership of the MMs in their respective departments. Moreover, my study also showed that a staff might decide to leave the company, partly because the MMs concerned did not show respect and care for the team members. On the other hand, when a MM had a career development coaching with a technical engineer, the staff felt respected and cared for. In their leadership practice MMs may focus on how the organizational change could impact on the career development of the team members and explore how the organization could help them adapt and learn in the future roles and responsibilities.

Organizational change is not just about tasks and targets; it is also about learning opportunities and career growth to the staff. To the global leaders of MNCs respect the local culture and care for the career development and emotional needs of their local staff far from their home countries could be easily said than done. However, without such respect and care, any change initiative could fail because of such ignorance or insensitivity.

Limitations of the Study

This organizational ethnography on leadership-as-practice of MMs in leading organizational change in the MNC setting within the Asia Pacific context, could be one of the few attempts in leadership studies on MMs with vigor and intensity. The study has its limitations as many other research projects do. Those limitations include:

1. **The MMs under study were some of the DHs of the research site, that is, the B5+1; it did not cover the whole middle management team**. Even among the B5+1, I only focused on the two DHs who had been impacted by the reorganization and integration of the teams, with shadowing exercise and follow

up interviews with their direct reports. As mentioned in Chapter V, both the Finance and the HR Teams had experienced an unexpectedly high staff turnover during my study, but I decided not to dive into those two departments. Firstly, the Finance department was not directly reporting to the PD; it is independent from the plant operations. Secondly, the HR department was my "direct customer" who I needed to deal with for my previous training and coaching engagement. I reckoned that it was necessary to keep an "arm's length" with the HR department during my study. Moreover, the HR Director had health issues, such that he was absent for an extensive period of time during my study.

2. **The research site was a high security plant and thus I could not freely walk around and talk to people as other organizational ethnographers could do.** To access to the shop floors, I had to apply for special access permit, and my time in the shop floors was very limited (as long as the DHs whom I was shadowing were having meetings or activities there). My ethnography access to the people concerned was mainly through direct observation at meetings, interviews, and plant tours. For the B5+1, I could also engage them in their lunch conversations and walks.

3. **My prior professional relationship with the top management and the DHs two years ago could be both a strength and a limitation to this study.** I was

highly regarded and trusted by the top management as well as the DHs when I arrived at the site. Other staff at the lower levels also recognized that I was "someone special" to the management team. Some of the managers and supervisors also attended my training workshops two years ago. They still called me "Teacher Kung" when they addressed me at the meetings or other occasions. Therefore, this researcher was not all together unknown and invisible in the eyes of the MMs and other staff. I addressed to this issue in the last section of Chapter IV. The researchers in organizational ethnography could encounter similar issues. They need to define their roles and boundaries with the research site and the target participants under study before and during the ethnographic study. The ethnographers must be reflexive as well as assertive in clarifying the different roles and act with greatest integrity and caution lest there could be any misunderstanding or manipulations on any parties involved.

4. **The nature of the organizational change was not the same as what I had planned before my arrival at the research site.** The promotion of the VP and the new PD became a major organizational change and consequently brought about other reorganization and integration of the teams. Nonetheless, that unexpected change had enriched my study to expand the scope to cover leadership transition in leading change.

5. **I only spent two days per week in the six-month research period, as my ethnographic immersion.** Compared with other anthropology ethnography, which usually lasts for 2–3 years in some remote areas or tribes, my six month organizational ethnography seems to be very short. Nonetheless, from March to August 2021, the research site had already relocated to the new site, and the reorganization started shortly after the promotion of the new PD in October 2020. I was able to observe the most critical leadership transition and team transition in that period. Moreover, considering the constraints of time and living costs, six months was the maximum time that I could invest. For practical reasons, most of the organizational ethnography studies that I had come across only involved 2–3 months.

6. **The research site is a European MNC operating in the southern part of China.** One could imagine that there are many differences among British, German, French, Dutch, Italian, or Russian companies. The European MNC under my study is very distinctive and is owned by Americans. At the local level, the majority of the management team are local Chinese who do not speak English as their first language. Even the European expatriates do not speak fluent English (sometimes I had a hard time understanding what they were saying because of their accent). Fortunately, I could speak fluent Mandarin and I could dialogue with

the DHs and other general staff in Mandarin. The reader of this study should be careful in applying the LAP Model to other MNCs and cultures in Asia Pacific.

7. **Lastly, the research site is a manufacturing facility, and the management team is managing the production and operation of the plant.** It is obviously very different from other organizations which focus on general management, financial services, sales and marketing, IT, R&D, customer service, retail, or design work. The LAP Model could be more applicable to manufacturing settings rather than other settings.

Recommendations for Future Studies

Following the last two points in the earlier section, I recommend that future studies on leadership-as-practice of MMs could be conducted in *other Asian countries* and in *other industry settings*. There have been some studies on transformational leadership and other leadership topics in Asia Pacific during the past 10 years. However, most of those studies used quantitative methods with assessment tools or surveys for data collection. *Qualitative studies* seem to be growing, but it is still very much a neglected trend in the region. I encourage more qualitative studies and perhaps organizational ethnographic studies to dive into the *depths* of leadership practice and organizational change issues relevant for business leaders in Asia Pacific region.

From my experience of gaining access to *business organizations*, I realize that it is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to get the permission from MNCs to allow researchers to conduct a vigorous study on their leadership and organizational change issues, which are often regarded as commercial secrets of the company. Some leadership studies had focused on small consulting and accounting firms, while others had worked with educational institutions, hospitals, government organizations, and NGOs. Universities and researchers should cultivate long term research partnerships with MNCs so that they could see the benefits of their support and sponsorship to leadership studies. After all, business corporations are the major users of leadership literature and research findings.

This study only covered the department heads of the manufacturing company. The leadership-as-practice of Joseph as the new *local top leader* in managing such kind of political relationships and leadership transition, could be interesting for exploration. Moreover, there are *N-2 and N-3 first line middle managers* who are further down in the corporate hierarchy. Their leadership-as-practice should be very different from those of the department heads, and they work more directly with the frontline workers. The number of those first line managers and supervisors is much larger than the department heads. For a MNC with 10,000 employees, the first line managers may well be of a thousand. Therefore, the value of leadership studies among the first line middle managers could be even higher.

One of the macro level changes of the organization was *corporate identity*. The identity of RSX-SZ shifted from the best site to the model site, which had important implications to

MMs in leading organizational changes. For instance, the MMs used to be very internal focused, trying to be the best of the best among all the global sites. Now, the MMs needed to share their best practices to the other sites and to teach them how to become the best. *How could the corporate identity influence the individual identity of MMs? How could such identity change affect their leadership practice?* Those could be further research questions to explore in the future.

Lastly, the *personal value* of the MMs in continuous learning and growth became a motivation for them to preserve through organizational and career changes. This study did not probe into this relationship with personal value and LAP because it was out of the scope of the study. It could be worthwhile to further explore other personal values of MMs, and how those values impact on their LAP at work.

Conclusion

Practicing leadership as the CEO of a multinational consulting firm in Asia Pacific, training and coaching business leaders, and studying on leadership and change, are three different matters all together from existential and experiential perspectives. The practical experience of leadership, including business transformation in my own company, gave me the firsthand knowledge about the challenges of leading change. The VUCA environment makes any change management initiatives highly unpredictable. The CEO might have the best vision and strategy to drive the business towards the desirable outcomes in the future, and yet the strategic plans may or may not work out as he wants to see happen because of unforeseen issues in the external environment and the internal organization.

Training and coaching business leaders provided me with the opportunities to understand how many MNCs in Asia Pacific went about driving organizational changes and the actual challenges that they encountered at different levels in their transformation process. The interactions and dialogues with the business leaders during the training workshops, and individual coaching sessions, enabled me to see from their perspectives the difficulties and dilemmas that the MMs faced in leading change.

Finally, the past four years of studying on leadership and change at Antioch University, and the present research project on LAP of MMs, has broadened my knowledge about leadership theories and empirical studies, and how to apply this knowledge to my dissertation. The three perspectives and experiences have converged in this organizational ethnography. It has been a wonderful journey of discovery and learning, which started some 28 years ago. I hope that it will continue in the years to come after the completion of this study.

Leadership and change are coexisting because leaders are to drive change and change calls for leadership. LAP has a distinctive definition about leadership, and how leadership could be observed and studied. Ethnography is an old research method used in anthropology recently applied to organization and leadership studies particularly in studying LAP. It has received more attention in academia and even business world. However, it has not been used extensively for various reasons. Some of those reasons could be the challenges in gaining access to organizations, and huge investments involved in terms of time, traveling costs, and accommodation costs (as in my case). However, the more I immersed in the organization, the more convinced I was about organizational ethnography as *the method* for practical leadership studies. It is not just about what the leaders say or do, or what the assessment tools say about what personalities or behavioral traits the leaders have exhibited (the leaders fill in the answers in any way they want). Organizational ethnography could study the actual practice of the leaders in action. The ethnographer could have the firsthand observation or experience of the interactions and dialogues between the leaders and the significant others of the organization.

Recent leadership studies had applied video recording technology for direct observation, to avoid the interference of the researcher's presence. From my experience in this research, the researcher's calm presence and trusted relationship with the participants and their significant others actually helped to put them at ease during their interactions. Some participants refused to let me record the interview through audio-recorder. I could not imagine how they would react if I were to tell them that their actions were video-recorded. People can trust a person, but they usually do not trust a video camera, not to mention the persons behind the scenes who are recording and watching the video.

Lastly, when we think that leadership is plural and collective, business leaders and scholars might look at how sports teams work and how leadership could be enhanced with different levels of the organization working together and creating those leadership moments in and out of the sports fields. Nonetheless, while we all understand that the leadership effectiveness of sports teams does not rest on any individuals alone, we still love to worship our idols in basketball and soccer leagues. Inherently, people still love heroes or wonder women. Our challenge is how to address those human factors and let leadership moments emerge among the players, the stakeholders, the fans, and the public. For the scholars, how should we design research methods that could reveal the true natures and practices of leadership in organization?

My organizational ethnography on LAP of MMs could hopefully become a significant step towards empirical studies on leadership-as-practice in Asia Pacific region. This venture is a collective effort, and we will see and experience those *leadership moments* in leadership studies as well as in leadership practices among organizations around the world.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A: Interviewing Questions With MMs

1. Would you please let me understand more about your general education and work history particularly your involvement with RSX-SZ?
2. What is your key role at RSX-SZ? What is your team/department like e.g. how many staff report to you? What are their general background and roles?
3. How would you describe your past work history at RSX-SZ? What really stands out that has made who you are and what you do today?
4. What were the major organizational changes (if any) that you needed to manage in the past 12 months? How did those changes impact on you and your team?
5. What did those changes mean to you? How did you respond to those changes? What have you done to cope with those changes?
6. What did those changes mean to your team? How did your team respond to those changes? What have they done to cope with the changes? What did they say to you? What have they done to you or to the organization if any?
7. What are the main challenges to you as MM in leading organizational changes? What have you done to manage those challenges?
8. Was the vision of change clear to you and your team? What did the top management say about the vision of change? Do you and your team buy-in that vision? Why? Or why not?
9. What did you say to your team about the vision of change? Did they buy-in your vision? Why? Or why not? What did they say about the vision? How did you respond?
10. What are their main concerns and feelings about the change? Did you communicate to the top management about those concerns and feelings of your team? What did the top management say about that?
11. How do you lead and manage your team in response to their concerns and feelings about the change? Were those actions effective?
12. What do your team members do or say to you to influence you about the change?
13. What are the challenges or obstacles during the implementation of the change? How did you and your team overcome those challenges?
14. How successful have you been in leading the organizational change?
15. How about your peer managers? How do they respond to those changes? Do you need to manage their expectations or perhaps conflicts with them brought about by those organizational changes? What do you do with the peer managers?
16. Are there other stakeholders impacted by those changes? What are their concerns and feelings about those changes? How do you or your team manage them?

17. How do you and your team make sense out of the change now? Are there any differences between now and then? What are those differences? How did such differences come about?
18. Say three to six months from now, and everything seems to go well after the transition, how would you know that the organizational change has gone well? What would you notice in your division/company? What would you notice in your team? What would you notice in yourself?

APPENDIX B: Briefing Script to the Middle Managers (Department Heads)

Introduction to the Research Project:

This is an organizational ethnographic study about exploring leadership-as-practice of the middle managers (MMs) during organizational change. The research findings could be useful for business leaders in Asia Pacific region to understand more about leadership-as-practice of MMs during organizational change for their planning of change management and leadership development purposes. For the research site organization, you and the management team might gain insights about your leadership practices and change management processes for future business transformation and leadership development.

I plan to spend **five to six months about two days per week** at the Shenzhen Site with the management team, particularly the **department heads**, to understand and observe their leadership practices and their interactions with their teams, their top management, and other stakeholders during the organizational change.

1) I will ***experience and observe*** the daily operations and interactions among MMs with their significant others in the site. The team meetings, dialogues at the office or plant site, coffee/cafeteria conversations, communications between the PD and MMs, and, most importantly, MMs' leadership actions could only be observed and analyzed in "real time" when they happen.
2) I will also conduct ***formal or informal interviews*** with the PD, MMs, and their direct subordinates to understand more about their thoughts and actions of leadership practices during the research period. Each of these formal interviews will be audially recorded solely for research purposes, but all of the participants' contributions will be de-identified prior to publication or the sharing of the research results. These recordings, and any other information that may connect you to the study, will be kept in a locked, secure location. Upon completion of the study, those recordings and information will be destroyed without trace.
3) Lastly, I will review some ***documents*** of the organization, with permission from the PD and MMs, to help me understand the organizational context and the related organizational change more deeply.

Participant Selection: You are being invited to take part in this research because you are one of the Executive Team members as the department head under the PD.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to participate. You will not be penalized for your decision not to participate or for anything of your contributions during the study. Your position in the RSX-SZ Plant will not be affected by this decision of your participation. You may withdraw from this study at any time. If interviews or direct observation have already taken place, the information you provided, or researcher observed will not be used in the research study.

Risks: There is minimal potential risk of harm to participants because I do not anticipate that you will be harmed or distressed during this study. Moreover, all the interviews and observation notes will be anonymous. Serious efforts will be made to make sure that the PD or any other readers from the potential research site would not be able to identify the participants being observed or interviewed. However, no study is completely risk free. There could be the potential risk that some informed readers might still identify who the participants are, just by reading the content and the general description of the practices or conversations, and that a truthful report of the data collected might present a risk to your career if the content or practice revealed is negative. You may stop being in the study at any time if you become uncomfortable. If you experience any discomfort as a result of your participation, Work Life Coaching or employee assistance counselors will be available to you as a resource.

Benefits: There will be no direct benefit to you, but your participation may help others in the future. You will not be provided any monetary incentive or other intangible benefits to take part in this research project.

Confidentiality: All information will be de-identified, so that it cannot be connected back to you. Your real name will be replaced with a pseudonym in the write-up of this project, and only the primary researcher will have access to the list connecting your name to the pseudonym. This list, along with tape recordings of the discussion sessions, will be kept in a secure, locked location. Your information will not be used or distributed for future research.

Limits of Privacy & Confidentiality: Generally speaking, I can assure you that I will keep everything you tell me or do for the study, private. Yet there are times where I cannot keep things private (confidential). The researcher cannot keep things private (confidential) when:

- The researcher finds out that a child or vulnerable adult has been abused;
- The researcher finds out that that a person plans to hurt him or herself, such as commit suicide;
- The researcher finds out that a person plans to hurt someone else.

There are laws that require many professionals to take action if they think a person is at risk for self-harm or are self-harming, harming another or if a child or adult is being abused. In addition, there are guidelines that researchers must follow to make sure all people are treated with respect and kept safe.

Future Publication: The primary researcher, Eric Kung, reserves the right to include any results of this study in future scholarly presentations and/or publications. All information will be de-identified prior to publication.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw: You do not have to take part in this research if you do not wish to do so, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without your job being affected.

Who to Contact: If you have any questions, you may ask them now or later. If you have questions later, you may contact **Eric Kung** at +852-xxxxxxxx or +861xxxxxxxx or at xxxxxx. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact **Dr. Lisa Kreeger**, Chair, Institutional Review Board, at xxxxxxx, Telephone: +1-xxxxxxxxxx.

This proposal has been reviewed and approved by the Antioch International Review Board (IRB), which is a committee whose task it is to make sure that research participants are protected. If you wish to find out more about the IRB, contact Dr. Lisa Kreeger.

After this briefing session I will be talking with the department heads individually to get your consent to participate in this research project. You can read the Informed Consent Form carefully and feel free to ask me any question now or later. I want to emphasize that your participation in this study is voluntary, and your choice of nonparticipation will be fully respected and kept confidential. The PD will not know who have agreed to participate or not. Likewise, I will also speak to your team (provided that you have agreed to participate and to let me observe you and your team) and their participation is also voluntary. The company, you and your team members may opt out any time during the study.

Finally, I would like you to understand that my role in the coming six months at RSX-SZ Plant is solely as a researcher. I will not be playing the consultant, trainer, or coach roles during the study, in order to maintain impartiality and objectivity in the research. If you should need coaching or counseling, I would be very happy to refer you to Work Life Coaching or Employee Assistance Program of RSX-SZ during the study period.

Feel free to ask me any questions about this study.