Tolerance of Tension

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Few leaders routinely experience the level of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity faced by US Navy SEALs. Yet, the tensions that SEALs concurrently deal with as leaders and followers are remarkably familiar to frontline and middle managers across civilian industries and organizations. This tension is an inherent byproduct of the dual roles they must fulfill concurrently as leader and follower and amplified by the increasingly turbulent environment. As such, frontline and middle managers, hereafter collectively referred to as "mid-level managers," must regularly employ a unique set of behaviors, known as "tolerance of tension," to achieve sustained success. To illustrate and explore these tensions more deeply, this article will leverage real-life examples from the career and working relationships of Rob and Matt (pseudonyms), Navy SEALs. The article will (1) begin by taking a deep dive into a vignette tracing historical events impacting Rob and Matt's roles as leaders and followers, (2) review the challenges that emerge as a result of the dual leader/follower roles of mid-level managers, (3) examine the intrinsic tensions of those positions, and finally (4) discuss the critical meta-behavior known as "tolerance of tension" that is needed for success in fast-moving, complex environments.

Tensions Embedded Within the Role of Navy SEALs

Rob was the class leader for his Basic Underwater Demolition / SEAL (BUD/S) class of 144 Matt was another young man in this class also aspiring to become a Navy SEAL. Over the next 15 years, those young men regularly trained and worked together, which unintentionally became a source of tension and conflict. When Matt ultimately took command of a sniper team, their tension came to the forefront: Rob was placed in a subordinate role despite being older, with a higher formal rank, and more years of service.

The difference in age and rank, albeit normal in SEAL teams, put strain on Matt and Rob's relationship. As the number of leadership positions became increasingly scarce with seniority, Rob's ability to be promoted was contingent upon Matt's departure or advancement from his position. However, Matt could not promote quickly due to the required years in role. Matt was a significant obstacle to Rob's career progression. It was against this backdrop of relational and functional tension that Rob and Matt were assigned to a particularly sensitive operation.

The Operation

It had been over 50 hours since anyone slept. The developments over the previous day required everyone be available to respond at any moment. As the sun set, the team was aware that they would only have 30 minutes of total darkness to perform the operation before the moon began to rise. Based on the distance to the enemy, the ascending ambient light from the moon would remove almost all elements of surprise. After the team pulled the enemy vessel close enough to the Navy ship for the towline to dance above the surface of the water, Matt positioned himself with a detained combatant and the interpreter. Rob gave direction to the junior members of team.

As dusk lifted, the enemy became agitated as they were being towed away from their desired direction. Matt managed the voice communications between the towing and towed vessels. The high-pitched whine of machinery and churning ocean made the voice interaction difficult.

Rob, now Matt's assistant Sniper Team Leader, swiftly moved while saying, "The boss cleared us hot, and we can take the combatants all at once. I positioned Eastwood on the portside and I'm taking starboard." As quickly as Rob arrived, he disappeared into the darkness, cloaked by the choreographed moves of the deck hands and operators following Rob's directions. There was no time for discussion. The team was in place and the only thing to do was keep working. Following Matt's brief interaction with the interpreter, he moved to the interior of the ship to recover his weapon and gear. In the moment that Matt stepped back on the aft deck, he heard shots fired. Their professional trust and willingness to openly and consistently dialogue about this situation allowed for aligned, but independent action, and positive problem-solving to seize the opportunity when the moment presented itself, even if Matt did not make the call in that moment.

SEALs must effectively toggle between roles of both leader and follower, embracing the intrinsic tension to execute a mission in a highly dynamic situation. Mid-level managers must also lean into the inherent tension of their dual roles in order to be successful.

Operating at the Precarious Juncture Point

SEALs and mid-level managers alike continuously sway between leadership and followership, constantly barraged by the responsibility and demands of their leaders (Levinson, 1981). This is further complicated as they lack access to critical information and resources necessary for decision-making and execution (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). Accomplished "followers" are at the juncture between top-down demands and bottom-up challenges (Belasen & Belasen, 2016). They sit in a precarious position that is

saturated by contradiction, competing priorities, and paradox that ultimately ferments into an unending glass of tension (Luscher & Lewis, 2008; Kan & Parry, 2004). As mid-level managers navigate this tension, they must concurrently serve as lynchpins (Huy, 2002) holding the organization together, connecting the strategic imperatives of senior leadership to the tactical operations of the frontline. Removing or disempowering mid-level managers in any organization will result in stagnation and misalignment. They are expected to develop organizational capabilities (Ouakouak, Ouedraogo & Mbengue, 2014), create a purpose for themselves and their teams (Weick, 1995; Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Beck & Plowman, 2009), provide structure (Belasen & Frank, 2010), promote innovation (Howell & Higgins, 1990) and spur strategic change (Burgelman, 1983; Burgelman & Grove, 2007). Despite this instrumental role, middle managers are often ignored. Organizational success in complex environments hinges upon the willingness and ability of mid-level managers to tolerate, even embrace, the tension that is woven into the very fabric of social systems.

Quinn (1988) suggests that conflicting needs and competing values are an inherent byproduct of a social system. Inequitable power dynamics and the stress that comes with those complex interplays are inevitable, placing a regular strain on mid-level managers. Matt's need for tenure in his role, and Rob's desire to lead, provide examples of such a challenging power dynamic. While neither leaders, nor followers, are immune from this strain, it manifests itself in a qualitatively different way depending on an individual's position within the power dynamic. In both cases, leaders and followers must deal with cognitive, psychological, and social stress, but those stressors originate from different sources. By the nature of their roles, mid-level leaders experience the challenges associated with leadership, as well as those associated with followership, compounding the intensity of this strain.

The strain of leadership that results from a leader's elevated position is well-documented (Sparks, Faragher, & Cooper, 2001). Leaders are required to simultaneously conceive and perform multiple, contradictory roles. Goode's (1960) seminal work clearly indicates that the total role obligations of an individual leader are over-demanding. Beyond the integration and differentiation between tasks, leaders must also manage the emotional and mental states of followers (Wirtz, Rigotti, Otto & Loeb; 2017), while bearing the burden of accomplishing organizational goals. To maintain the required power distance between themselves and their teams, leaders also frequently operate in isolation. While necessary, this social imbalance caused by power distance compounds the stress leaders routinely feel. Amidst this social isolation, paradoxically, leaders must still routinely interact both laterally, horizontally, and outside the organization (Denison, Hooijberg & Quinn, 1995).

Mid-level managers must navigate the paradoxical obstacles of leadership, while simultaneously facing the intense challenges of followers. Followers operate in a complex world that requires them to be both an influencer and a contributor, all while not having full decision-making authority, complete contextual awareness, nor access to resources (Belasen & Belasen, 2016). They frequently exist in a communication vacuum with unclear expectations, producing cognitive strain (McKinely & Scherer, 2000).

As they dynamically shift between leader and follower roles, individuals who serve in the mid-levels of organizations are exposed to combinations of these stressors on a regular basis. La Rocco & Jones (1978) articulate that this "role conflict and role ambiguity" lead to further job dissatisfaction, disengagement, and increased anxiety. Despite these sizable barriers to performance, these individuals have been long identified as the key to organizational success, especially in tumultuous environments (Burgelman, 1983). Yet, they rarely get the support, resources, or accolades to be successful, and as such, this paradoxical state is compounded.

To fully grasp the criticality and complexity of this lynchpin role, we must take a deeper look at the dynamic nature of leadership – an emergent property of a system that involves leader-follower-context as depicted in Figure 1 (McChrystal, Eggers & Mangone, 2018).

The view of leadership being comprised of a unidirectional influence that flows from leader to follower is challenged by a number of subsequent theorists and researchers (Meindl, 1995; Shamir, 2007; Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera & McGregor, 2010; Fairhurst, 2009). Despite the ongoing obsession of leadership traits, there is a growing recognition that leadership is co-constructed by both the leader and followers, where influence and power fluidly shift from one to the other. Followers are not passive recipients. Rather, they are active participants in the process of leadership. Followers interpret and shape a leader's vision into reality for themselves, their formalized leader, and others in the organization (Shamir, 2007). In fact, Meindl (1995) implies that the true power resides in the followers who define leadership through their willingness (or refusal) to defer to another person in a meaningful way (Uhl-Bien, 2014).

The understanding that followers constitute a critical component of leadership fuels interest in the research and conceptual understanding of followership. As Uhl-Bien (2014) aptly describes, the study of followership is not the exploration of leadership through the follower perspective. Rather, "it is the study of how followers view and enact following behaviors in relation to leaders" (p. 96). To systematically explore these behaviors, Carsten et al. (2010) developed a typology of followers based on a continuum that stretches from passive to proactive. Passive followers are loyal and supportive, routinely deferring to the expertise and knowledge of the formal leader. These

individuals embody the traditional expectations of a "follower," who does not question authority and simply meets the objectives they are instructed to accomplish. Active followers exhibit many of the same loyal characteristics as passive followers but are willing to offer up alternative ideas and suggestions if they are provided the opportunity. These individuals withhold their perspectives to maintain the prescribed social order, patiently waiting for the chance to inject their thoughts when they will cause minimal disruption. Followers who engage in the highest level of social co-construction of the environment are designated as "proactive" followers. These individuals believe that they inherently have the right and responsibility to shape their world. They see themselves as partners, or co-producers, who should challenge and push the leader to achieve the goals and mission of the organization, just as Rob demonstrated during the mission.

Despite his official role as a leader, Matt was not in a position to coordinate the sniper shots during the mission described above. Matt's role was to manage a detained combatant and maintain positive communication with the rest of the team. Rob's recognition of his leader's focus elsewhere led him to take initiative in that critical moment. This was the differentiating factor between success and a missed opportunity against the enemy. Rob served as a proactive follower, accepting the mantle of leadership and taking command at the climax of the operation without asking for permission from Matt. Demonstrating similar flexibility in the moment, Matt rapidly and effectively toggled from leader to follower in order to not disrupt tactical momentum.

The dynamic interplay between leader, follower, and context was on full display during the operation, reinforcing the DeRue and Ashford's (2010) claim, "If leadership is a mutual influence process among individuals, then social interaction among those individuals and various contextual factors can cause leader and follower identities to shift over time and across situations" (p. 628). The systems model of leadership is an ever-shifting and evolving dance that evades stability because of its composite of actors, situational variables, and multiple dimensions (Küpers, 2007). This perspective increases the conceptual and theoretical complexity of leadership with very real implications for those individuals who regularly operate in the middle of organizations – at the precarious juncture point.

Tension in the Middle

As part of their formal roles, mid-level managers understandably experience routine job stress associated with role conflict and role ambiguity (McConville, 2006; LaRocco & Jones, 1978), as demonstrated with Rob who needed to follow Matt's direction, but also know when to step in and contribute as a leader. This cognitive dissonance (McConville, 2006) is often compounded by a cacophony of information and competing priorities

(Vilkinas & Cartan, 2006). These individuals are bombarded with information. They are the recipients of top-down demands and bottom-up requests. Frustratingly, they are often high enough in the organization to see hazy images of risks and opportunities on the horizon, but not high enough to have the power to take decisive action. They are also low enough in the organization to hear the complaints and see the struggles of individuals executing on the frontlines, but not on the frontlines so as to understand what is specifically needed to rectify the situation. Despite this opaque position, mid-level managers are often still held responsible for successfully executing initiatives or implementing organizational changes (Belasen & Belasen, 2016), while others often receive the credit for the success.

This role of change architect – an individual who communicates senior leader strategy and facilitates frontline execution based on that strategy (Belasen & Belasen, 2016) – is a significant source of ongoing tension felt by those in the middle. Hatch and Ehrlich (1993) state, "When environments are complex and changing, conditions are ripe for the experience of contradiction, incongruity, and incoherence and the recognition of paradox and ambiguity within organizations" (p. 505-506). Mid-level managers must submerge themselves into this chaos to bring a degree of stability and order, while not fully understanding the ramifications of their decisions and actions (Belasen & Frank, 2010). They must interpret the situation and create shared meaning (Beck & Plowman, 2009; Smircich & Morgan, 1982) in order to establish a common understanding and reduce anxiety within their teams. They then serve as "organizational connectors," which permits information flow across departments (Taylor & Helfat, 2009) in order to execute change in a coordinated fashion. This causes tension because middle managers are required to filter data from multiple perspectives to determine what information has material impact on strategy and what information is required at the operational and tactical level to support right decision-making.

In an ever-changing, globally-connected world, the "change architect" role of mid-level managers is becoming more prevalent. Organizations must nurture an adaptive capability in order to survive in a capricious environment. Necessarily, that capability includes tension. Research conducted within the realm of Complexity Theory supports this claim. Complexity Theory argues that tension is essential for ongoing adaptability. Tension is the fuel that balances complex adaptive systems that operate at the edge of chaos, far from equilibrium (Stacey, 1995; Pascale, 1999). Kauffman (1993) suggests that organizational adaptability is specifically fueled by the tension between the "frozen core" (i.e. processes, values, culture, existing structures) and the unfrozen islands where localized environmental pressures drive experimentation and innovation. Hyper-reactivity to environmental perturbations can lead to chaos. It is the paradoxical tension between these frozen and unfrozen components that ignites passion and motivation for

change without allowing the organization to descend into this chaos. Mid-level managers serve at the volatile juncture point between the frozen core and the unfrozen islands of an organization in the same way that they serve at the juncture between senior leaders and frontline followers. As such, these individuals must leverage a set of behaviors that effectively mitigate the damaging impact of constant conflict, change, and uncertainty, while leveraging the tension to foster a sustained adaptive capacity.

Tolerance of Tension

"Tolerance of tension" is a meta-behavior that should be employed by individuals to drive adaptability on a team. This meta-behavior encompasses the proactive navigation of tension within one's self, with others, and with the environment. While this meta-behavior is important for individuals at every level of an organization, it is particularly critical for those lynchpins in the mid-level manager role. The organization's ability to effectively communicate, explore new possibilities, execute new initiatives, and sustain the change overtime, is ultimately dependent on these change architects, who concurrently occupy formal positions as leader and follower.

Effective mid-level change architects embrace the complex interdependencies of their dynamic environments, accepting that paradoxes are an inherent component of organizational functioning (Kan & Parry, 2004). They recognize that those paradoxes facilitate creative tension through expanded and diversified perspectives, which leads to innovation and adaptability over time (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Kan and Parry (2004) suggest that "effective leadership is a process that reconciles paradox" (p. 487). Luscher and Lewis (2008) observed this reconciliation in practice by middle managers at the Lego Company. As the middle managers navigated the confounding paradoxes that regularly impacted their team's performance, they moved toward a conscious awareness of the ongoing presence of inconsistencies, conflict, and ambiguity embedded within their roles. Rather than causing paralysis, their newfound awareness equipped them to make sense of the larger situation and move from simplistic "either/or" solutions to richer "both/and" solutions. Kan and Parry (2004) similarly found that mid-level managers who reconciled paradox were able to embrace divergent opinions and engage in healthy tactics such as networking and rational persuasion. In turn, these tactics encouraged novel and innovative solutions that drove positive change.

Conversely, those who could not tolerate the tension resorted to artificially simplifying their reality, pushing their perspective on others through intimidation, manipulation, and control of information. Without a supportive climate that acknowledged the complexities of the situation, those teams could not develop innovative and realistic solutions that effectively addressed the challenges they faced.

Tension Within One's Self

Awareness and comfort with paradox exhibited by effective mid-level managers stretches beyond organizational paradoxes (e.g., short-term objectives vs. long-term goals, team cohesion vs. individual independence, competition vs. collaboration) and extends to internal paradoxes (e.g., prioritizing organizational goals vs. employees, leveraging candor vs. diplomacy, challenging employees vs. being supportive) (Hunter, Thoroughgood, Myer & Ligon, 2011). One such internal paradox that has significant impact for those lynchpin roles is flexible leadership vs. authentic leadership.

Leaders and followers alike have natural styles of interaction that are exacerbated under stress. These "default settings" are typically composed of tendencies that have previously produced some modicum of success. These actions become more and more entrenched through retroactive sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and habit formation (Lally, Van Jaarsveld, Potts, & Wardle, 2010). While these default settings enable quick and efficient responses, they also limit the range of skills and solutions a person has at their disposal in a novel situation. Those who move beyond their entrenched tendencies, "adjusting [their] leadership style, method, or approach in response to different or changing contextual demands in a way that facilitates group performance" are said to exhibit flexible leadership (Kaiser & Overfield, 2010, p. 106).

Zaccaro, Gilbert, Thor & Mumford (1991) break down this capability of flexible leadership into two components: (1) the ability to properly diagnose the situation and determine the appropriate actions, and (2) the ability to carry out the appropriate actions. Yukl and Mahsud (2010) further the exploration of the essential nature of flexible leadership by examining seven (7) distinct streams of theory and research and providing associated practical guidelines.

PRACTICAL GUIDELINES

Contingency theories about situational variables that moderate the effects of leadership behavior:

- Learn to diagnose the situation and use relevant contingency theories to identify appropriate types of leadership behavior for each type of situation.
- Increase flexibility for learning how to use a wide range of relevant behaviors; methods found to be useful for improving behavior include multi-source feedback, behavioral modeling, role playing, and executive coaching.

- Proactively influence aspects of the situation to create substitutes for leadership; for example, improve the selection of competent subordinates to reduce the need for close supervision and direction.
- When subordinates have high role ambiguity, the leader should clarify objectives, priorities, standards, and policies, monitor their work more closely, and provide helpful feedback and coaching.
- When subordinates lack strong commitment for a task, the leader should explain why it is important, appeal to their values and emotions, and provide valued incentives for successful execution of the task.
- When subordinates have relevant information and ideas about a decision and share the leader's task objectives, the leader should involve them in analyzing the problem, suggesting solutions, and making a decision.
- When a subordinate is highly competent and reliable, the leader should delegate more responsibility and encourage more initiative in resolving work-related problems.
- When subordinates have interdependent tasks that require a high level of cooperation and teamwork, the leader should emphasize common interests and values, provide incentives for overall group performance, and use team-building activities that build identification with the group.
- When subordinates lack adequate resources to perform their assigned tasks, try to obtain additional resources and allocate them in a way that will ensure they are used efficiently to accomplish task objectives.

Comparative studies of essential roles and behaviors for different types of leadership positions:

- Find out what role expectations people have for you in your current position and the types of behavior that are considered appropriate by the boss, peers, and subordinates.
- When you need to interact with people from other countries, learn about cross-cultural differences in role expectations and attitudes about ideal forms of leadership behavior.
- Identify choices in your roles and behaviors, and determine which ones are consistent with your interests, skills, and objectives.
- Proactively influence teammates' expectations of your role to avoid unrealistic or inappropriate expectations and increase your choices.

Studies of managers who make successful or unsuccessful transitions to different positions:

- When deciding about your personal career changes, consider the skills and behaviors needed in a new position and your qualifications for it. Then, identify relevant strengths and weaknesses in your current skills, and consider the possibility that current strengths can become weaknesses if overemphasized in the new job.
- Use developmental activities and take advantage of diverse experiences to enhance skills you are likely to need in a future position.
- Assist subordinates develop the skills needed to prepare them for promotions or expected changes in their jobs by providing developmental assignments, coaching, and mentoring;

help subordinates understand the differences in skill requirements for current and future jobs.

- When recommending subordinates for a promotion or a new assignment, consider skills relevant for the new position in addition to a person's past performance; the essential skills for the new position may not have been required for earlier success.

Research on the response of managers to immediate disruptions and crises:

- Learn to recognize early warning signs of impeding crisis that can affect your organization; avoid the common tendency to ignore or discount these warning signs.
- Make a quick but systematic analysis to understand an immediate problem or crisis.
- Direct the response by the unit or team in a confident and decisive way, but remain receptive to information and ideas from others about things you may have overlooked.
- Keep responses to a crisis consistent with the core values of the organization and high standards of corporate social responsibility.
- Plan in advance to avoid serious problems and make contingency plans for coping with potential issues that cannot be avoided.
- Keep teammates informed about the nature of a major problem and what is being done to resolve that problem.
- Conduct a review session after a crisis ends to determine what was done well, what mistakes were made, and what lessons were learned.

Research on emerging threats and opportunities in the external environment that requires adaptive, strategic leadership:

- Monitor external changes and identify emerging threats and opportunities.
- Identify relevant strategies, decisions, and actions for responding to external changes.
- Articulate an appealing vision of the likely benefits from proposed changes.
- Identify reasons for resistance to change and seek to convert opponents to change agents.
- Build optimism for a new strategy but balance it with the recognition that change will not be easy.
- Monitor progress of major changes and make any necessary adjustments.
- Keep people informed about the progress of change and maintain commitment for it.
- Use information about the outcomes of strategic decisions to refine mental models.

Research on conditions that make adaptive leadership more difficult, such as competing values and stakeholder conflicts:

- Consider how actions intended to achieve one objective will affect other objectives.
- Look for synergies and ways to achieve multiple objectives simultaneously.
- Find an appropriate balance for behaviors that are opposites.
- Understand how extreme amounts of some behaviors can have adverse consequences.
- Understand the values and priorities for important stakeholders and how they differ.
- Identify different priorities for stakeholders and look for ways to reconcile them.
- Understand how changing conditions are likely to affect preferences and alter priorities.

Research on traits and skills that facilitate flexible and adaptive leadership:

- Learn about the types of traits and skills that enhance flexible and adaptive leadership (e.g., cognitive complexity, social intelligence, empathy, situational awareness, self-awareness).
- Understand how the relative importance of different skills varies with level of management (e.g., talk to promoted managers to learn how they adapted to the difference).
- Take advantage of opportunities to assess your traits, skills, and behavior and increase self-awareness about them (e.g., from feedback programs and developmental assessment centers).
- Look for opportunities (e.g., training programs, mentoring, executive coaching) to develop skills that will improve flexible and adaptive leadership.
- Help subordinates who have leadership responsibilities or who seek to increase responsibilities to develop skills that facilitate flexibility and adaptation.
- Consider skills and traits relevant for flexible and adaptive leadership when determining who to recommend for a promotion.

While the literature associated with flexible leadership naturally focuses on the leader, it is a logical leap to imagine that flexible followership would similarly produce virtuous effects on group performance. As such, mid-level managers should use Yukl and Mahsud's (2010) practical guidelines to elevate their own effectiveness and their team's adaptive capacity, regardless if they are serving as the leader or follower in a particular context.

However, flexible leadership (or followership) is only part of the puzzle. As mentioned previously, effective mid-level managers paradoxically combine flexible leadership (or followership) with authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2005) and/or authentic followership (Leroy, Anseel, Gardner, & Sels, 2015). Authentic leaders are "deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others' values/moral perspectives, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate" (Avolio, Luthans, & Walumbwa, 2004, pg. 4). According to Luthans and Avolio (2003), this awareness is a product of self-regulation and self-development, which results in positive self-esteem and a resilient ego (Leroy et al., 2015). This gives individuals the ability to assess situations and their own actions with greater objectivity and adjust accordingly. Additionally, this allows an individual to not only translate and execute on a leader's vision, but to also address the fluctuating needs of the team in execution.

Rob experienced tension within himself when he understood that his individual development and goals were at times in conflict with that of Matt and/or the interests of the team. Rob wanted to lead and had a proficiency to do so, but in this moment, he needed to follow. This conflict forced him to acknowledge the misalignment, which then

allowed him to internally prioritize his energy to be most effective for the mission. Rob did this while trusting that continued experiences and development were also important to aid his path to eventual promotion. Rob consistently considered his ability to focus his energy to what his team needed, while appreciating his internal professional growth. His self-awareness permitted an admirable confidence that allowed Rob to operate as both a follower and a leader.

Embracing the paradoxical combination of flexible and authentic leadership is the essence of tolerating the tension within oneself. Individuals who understand their situation and their own tendencies (strengths, weaknesses, biases, etc.) have the confidence and ability to shift their style and approach to meet the demands of the context and followers, while remaining true to their intrinsic nature. Of course, this does not eliminate the potential for conflict with others. Instead, it enables mid-level managers to lean into interpersonal tension in order to produce a valuable outcome.

Tension with Others

Conflict is an inevitable part of social systems. Even if one could theoretically eliminate stylistic differences, power dynamics, and miscommunication, there would still be conflict due to misaligned priorities that arise from the paradoxical nature of organizing (Luscher & Lewis, 2008). De Dreu (2008) states, "Workplace conflict is inherent to organizations and, to a large extent, an autonomous process that is difficult to channel and control. Most of the time, avoiding or preventing conflict is not an option" (p. 15). Still, many leaders attempt to deny the inevitability of conflict to satisfy their own emotional comfort, but the most effective mid-level managers acknowledge this natural state of conflict in social systems and seek ways to deescalate destructive conflict while leveraging advantageous conflict to drive better outcomes.

Conflict permits greater innovation (Janssen, 2003) and more thorough decision-making (Schulz-Hardt, Jochims, & Frey, 2002), as well as a host of other organizational benefits. However, De Dreu (2008) notes that the net positive value of these outcomes only take place in a very narrow range of circumstances, and even when the circumstances are right, conflict still requires a great deal of time and emotional energy to ensure a favorable result without lasting relational hindrances. Individuals who can tolerate tension with others recognize the potential pitfalls and potential rewards of conflict, deftly evaluating and navigating situations to increase a mid-level manager's adaptive capacity because of their ability to harness innovation and decision-making to a greater degree.

Conflict often triggers a threat response, generating emotions that can lead to negative arousal, including jealousy, hatred, anger, and frustration. When there is perceived

threat, what would have previously been rational and instrumental reasoning is overrun by emotion (Jehn, 1997). To reduce this threat response and increase the likelihood of a positive outcome, wise mid-level managers make efforts to establish a climate of trust. When trust exists, it promotes individual familiarity, which can mitigate cognitive and role-based dissonance (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995). This permits an environment that lessens any burden of tension so that a follower can gracefully dance between following and leading (Camelo-Ordaz, Cruz & Ginel, 2014; Tjosvold, 2008). Through repeated interactions and multifaceted relationships, an enhanced understanding of others emerges (Northouse, 2016; Yang, 2014). This enhanced understanding begins with clarifying identity and roles.

To reduce conflict that may adversely impact group cohesion, effective leaders and followers will establish a well-defined identity with clarity around roles and responsibilities within the team. When this clarity is missing, unhealthy conflict and tension can increase (De Dreu & Ashford, 2010) because individuals are jockeying for credit, negotiating roles, or competing for resources. This pulls important resources and focus away from accomplishing team objectives in order to resolve the conflict. Clarity surrounding the leader-follower relationship is particularly critical when groups face problems that require an adaptive response (Van Vugt, Hogan & Kaiser, 2008). This clarity permits others to take independent but unified actions. Effective mid-level managers seek opportunities to establish this clarity and structure, but they also recognize that relationships and identity formation are fluid and highly contextual, which can make this difficult (Collinson, 2006; De Dreu & Ashford, 2010). Those that don't flex to the changing environment fall behind their peers, as they get consumed in relationship-conflict or stagnate. To manage these environmental shifts and relational dynamism, successful mid-level managers must take a proactive approach (Carsten et al., 2010), openly communicating and influencing subordinates, peers, and superiors, which in itself may be a source of tension.

Rob and Matt were aware that a desirable solution to their dilemma of career progression was not immediately available. Their willingness to repeatedly communicate and iterate on potential solutions permitted their individual and relationship perspectives to evolve in a positive direction. The in-depth understanding of the desire for a suitable outcome and the dynamic obstacles allowed them to remain adaptable throughout their working relationship. They collaborated and navigated tension by routinely establishing role clarity and building trust through authentic communication. This resulted in their ability to identify opportunities for the broader team and capitalize on them on short notice required by an ever-changing environment. This was evidenced when Rob instructed the sniper to take a shot at the enemy because he knew his leader, Matt, was working on something else.

Carsten et al. (2010) categorized individuals like Rob as "proactive followers," who "actively influenced their leaders through constructive challenge and upward communication in an attempt to advance positive change in their department or organization" (p. 558). This act of "speaking out" (Jablin, 2006) or "voicing up" is a rare and critical demonstration of courageous followership (Chaleff, 2003). This behavior is important as it raises others' self-awareness (Oc & Bashshur, 2013) and situational awareness in order to drive better group performance, especially in challenging environments. In 2003, Warren Bennis said, "Courage is the X factor that can make or break corporate America" (as cited in Jablin, 2006). However, this courage comes at a cost. Even when proactive followers "speak out" and confront problems appropriately, the stress-related effects of conflict on the individuals and the team cannot be avoided (De Dreu, 2008). Mid-level managers who effectively tolerate the "tension with others" are able to use "task-related" conflicts – rather than "person-related conflicts" (De Dreu, 2008) – to promote diverse thinking and creative collisions that ultimately produce novel, innovative solutions. Of course, this is easier said than done. Not only do they need to correctly assess the conflict and the personalities of those involved, but they must also consider the conflict through the lens of the bigger picture and take action accordingly even when that bigger picture is cloudy, opaque, and in flux.

Tension with the Environment

Change is an inherent characteristic of all environments (Weick & Quinn, 1999; Bigley & Roberts, 2001). To characterize the level of volatility in an environment and examine its effect on organizational performance, Davis et al. (2009) developed a multi-dimensional construct that classified environments by velocity, complexity, ambiguity, and unpredictability. Velocity describes the rate or speed of environmental change (Eisenhardt & Bourgeois III, 1988). Complexity refers to the number of elements that must be considered concurrently (Anderson, 1999). Ambiguity describes a lack of situational clarity such that opportunities and risks are difficult to identify (March & Olsen, 1976). Unpredictability indicates there is a lack of a discernible pattern which hinders future action (Davis et al., 2009). Together, these four dimensions provide a helpful taxonomy to diagnose and characterize a variety of environments. Groups and teams find themselves operating in turbulent environments that exhibit high levels of four of these dimensions more and more often (Levi, 2007).

Individuals at all levels of an organization must move forward and execute despite these challenging conditions. Again, mid-level managers shoulder much of the responsibility of execution, despite having limited visibility into the greater context and strategic decisions made at higher levels (Belasen & Belasen, 2016). They must make sense of the environmental conditions and context and provide others with the cognitive structure

they need to act (Smircich, & Morgan, 1982; Weick, 2009). When this sensemaking is lacking, "a result is anxiety that debilitates decision-making and implementation" (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008, p. 222).

Individuals who tolerate "tension with the environment" do not simply exhibit a tolerance of ambiguity (Furnham & Ribchester, 1995). While mid-level managers must be able to maintain cognitive and emotive stability in uncertain circumstance, they must also proactively frame experiences in such a way that drives appropriate action. Smircich and Morgan (1982) assert, "The key challenge for a leader is to manage meaning in such a way that individuals orient themselves to the achievement of desirable ends. In this endeavor, the use of language, rituals, drama, stories, myths, and symbolic construction of all kinds may play an important role" (p. 262-263). However, it is important to note that in the context of the mid-level managers, this sensemaking is not restricted to a downward flow. As they are also followers, these key lynchpins influence their superiors as well, co-constructing an actionable reality in partnership with their leaders (Carsten et al., 2010).

Conclusion

In addition to their dual roles of leaders/followers, mid-level managers concurrently operate in multiple leader-follower-context systems. Success in this multi-dimensional context requires unique behaviors. Uhl-Bien, et al. (2013) conclude their paper by acknowledging the need to identify these unique behaviors: "Questions raised by this perspective are: What do patterns of leading and following look like in effective leadership and followership? What kinds of following behaviors are effective (and ineffective) for those in formal leadership positions?" (p. 99). The concept of tolerance of tension begins to address some of these questions. It pulls together disparate aspects in the leadership and followership literature that were previously seen as disconnected and points toward a set of actions that will result in greater effectiveness for those individuals who occupy the critical lynchpin roles in the middle of organizations.

The value of tolerance of tension is clearly visible in Rob's career. The operation at sea was successfully completed, an unprecedented event that sparked a period of immense trust in Navy SEALs and their ability to solve complex problems. The result increased their freedom of movement, which presented repeated opportunities to prove themselves in conflict zones across the globe.

Eventually Matt discovered a passion for the human dynamic that played out in these high intensity conflicts which turned in to an interest in human intelligence. He realized that he could step away from the Reconnaissance (Recce) Team Leader position and operate as an Intelligence Officer, allowing his rank to catch up to his positional

seniority, as well as, open the position for Rob. It was a decision that would eventually benefit them both immensely. Matt moved on and eventually was commissioned to Warrant Officer, a prestigious role between noncommissioned. Rob took over the Recce Team and following one deployment in that role he was selected as the sniper team leader on the most significant special operations mission in US history: eliminating the world's most notorious terrorist.

Despite differences in opinion or approach, Rob consistently led and followed with transparency and trust, while keeping the mission and service his top priority. Rob was able to tolerate the tension not only within himself, but also with others, to include Matt and the broader environment. Rob's ability to leverage tolerance of tension throughout his career resulted in life-long friendships, enormous respect from his peers, and an unrivaled career that was punctuated by some of the most celebrated missions ever accomplished by the Navy SEALs.

Based upon analysis of the literature and the firsthand accounts of Matt, we conclude that mid-level managers must recognize the benefits of tension and harness it accordingly by taking the following actions:

- Make the effort to identify the tensions (competing priorities) that are inherent in every complex situation. Make these tensions known to the team to equip them with greater context to make sense of the situation. This recognition not only reduces internal churn and stress, but also serves to foster a broader perspective that encourages unorthodox solutions.
- Create opportunities for healthy conflict that inject energy and diverse perspectives into the team. Encourage open discourse and debate of ideas and underlying assumptions, while proactively monitoring the state of the discussion to ensure it doesn't degenerate into a hostile experience that will detrimentally impact team functioning. Preemptively set "rules of engagement" to increase the likelihood that the conflict will remain productive.
- Stay focused on common purpose and the organization's shared mission. Common narratives and metaphors rooted in a shared language create a collective cognitive structure for coordinated action while providing the space for flexible responses to a changing environment.

Mid-level managers who employ these techniques will successfully navigate their complex and changing professional careers while driving their teams forward regardless of the challenges they face.

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