Middle managers in ambidextrous organizations: the challenges of being led, leading others and obtaining personal support

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A research article submitted to the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration.

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DECLARATION

I declare that this article is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorization and consent to carry out this research.

Signature	Date

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1 Cover Letter

I have chosen to publish my work in the **European Business Review** because it is a journal that focuses on business and management which is aligned to my topic on key business issues management and organisational strategy in complex environments (ambidextrous contexts). Moreover, there are recent article published in this journal, so I can join the conversation of the current authors. I have included the links to these articles below.

Authentic leadership's influence on ambidexterity with mediators in the South African context Scheepers, Caren Brenda; Christiaan Philippus Storm. European Business Review; Bradford Vol. 31, Iss. 3, (2019): 352-378.

ISSN	Journal	ABS 2018	Abdc 2016	Subject area
0955-534X	European Business Review	2	B	Gen & Strat

The journal has a good academic rating, ABS rating of 2 and Abdc B rating. It is Scopus indexed.

I can confirm that the article follows the journal's author guidelines, and an indication of the author sequence except for that my article is too long. This is because of my long list of references, methodology and findings. For the publication I will only give quotes for the Themes as opposed to the sub-themes included. I will also remove the detail of the validity process and refine my references to save on the word count. I have also noted that the journal gives one limitation and brief practical implications, which would have prejudiced me – a significant amount of marks are awarded to these sections in the MBA rubric.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Ambidexterity

Ambidexterity marries leadership, the levels of an organization and the organization's ability to balance running and changing itself (Mueller, Renzl, & Will, 2018).

2.1.1 Organisational ambidexterity

Ambidexterity as a business concept was first introduced by (Duncan, 1976) and then popularized by (March, 1991) ~~March (1991)~~ and (Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996). Ambidexterity has been used to describe varying phenomena including exploiting and exploring (Birkinshaw & Gupta, 2013). The original definition of ambidexterity is "balancing exploiting and exploring" (March, 1991; O'Reilly & Tushman, 1996). It is widely accepted that ambidexterity is most useful in large (Yu & Khessina, 2012; Lin, Yang, & Demirkan, 2007) resource-rich large organizations operating in environments in which competitive rivalry is high and the business environment is uncertain (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). As such, the links between organisational performance and ambidexterity have been theorised and studied extensively (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013; Mueller et al., 2018).

These studies which looked at different industries (Geerts, Blindenbach-Driessen, & Gemmel, 2010) and were at different levels of the organization (Mueller et al., 2018), all show that ambidexterity has a positive effect on organizational performance, albeit to varying degrees (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). For example, (Geerts et al., 2010) found differences on the impact of ambidexterity between manufacturing and service industries. The above studies focus on the short term survival as opposed to taking a longer term view (sustainable competitive advantage) so there are still gaps in the literature (Yu & Khessina, 2012).

Another aspect of ambidexterity that has received equal attention from academia is how ambidexterity can be achieved. The literature differentiates between three forms of organisational ambidexterity. Firstly, structural ambidexterity, sequential ambidexterity and contextual ambidexterity (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). Structural ambidexterity is where an

organisation explores and exploit through separate business units (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008). Second is Duncan (1976)'s sequential ambidexterity, involves the whole organisation switching between exploiting and exploring. Third is contextual ambidexterity involves all levels of the organization, including business units and individuals, simultaneously exploiting and exploring (Adler, Goldoftas, & Levine, 1999; Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004).

Chen and Katila (2008) found that all three forms of ambidexterity improved organisational performance under specific conditions. For example, contextual ambidexterity was found to be most beneficial for large organisations in complex business environments (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004) and sequential ambidexterity was found to be more suitable for small firms or firms in stable environments such as the service industry (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). These varying conditions could be the reason why researchers continue to debate about which one of these three forms of ambidexterity is best (Gupta, Smith & Shalley, 2006). Despite this ongoing debate, the bulk of existing literature is on organisational level structural and sequential ambidexterity with very few studies which look at the mechanics of ambidexterity below the organisational level (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013) and contextual ambidexterity remains sparse. This observation is surprising because contextual ambidexterity is the most challenging form of ambidexterity (Good & Michel, 2013).

Secondly, contextual ambidexterity requires delegating key strategic decisions to lower level employees which may not be practical (Kauppila, 2010) and the creation of a supportive organisational culture and empowerment of skilled individual employees (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004; Rosing & Zacher, 2017). One would expect more literature to unpack it practicality.

Even though there is still robust debates on the what and the how of ambidexterity, there is consensus that ambidexterity is critical for large resource-rich organizations operating in environments in which competitive rivalry is high and the business environment is uncertain (Yu & Khessina, 2012; Lin, Yang, & Demirkan, 2007; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). There is also agreement that ambidexterity is no longer optional in the current business environment which is increasingly complex (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). In addition, following the global financial crisis capital resources have become scarce (Nieto-Rodrigue, 2014). And, the changing workforce also brings with its additional complexity (Woods, 2016).

As a result, researchers are questioning the practicality of sequential and structural ambidexterity in this context. For example, sequential ambidexterity assumes unconstrained resources, which is difficult to achieve within a corporate where shareholders have choices regarding where to place their capital (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004; Simsek, 2009). Similarly, structural ambidexterity requires the organisation and the top management team to have different competencies and capabilities which requires unlimited resources (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008). Nieto-Rodriguez (2014) therefore argued that most organisations, including those which are deemed resource rich, cannot afford to run separate entities. It is therefore surprising that more research has been on the other two forms of ambidexterity and literature on contextual ambidexterity remains sparse (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013; Booth, 2018).

Besides the discussion on the form of ambidexterity, other critics of the field of ambidexterity argue that there is a plethora of definitions of ambidexterity which cause confusion (Birkinshaw & Gupta, 2013; Mueller et al., 2018; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2011). Nieto-Rodriguez (2014) also critiqued the academic literature on ambidexterity from a practitioner view. The author argues that the language used in the academic literature is overly complex. For example, terms such as "exploitation" and "exploration" are too technical for the lay practitioners. Instead, organisational ambidexterity can be redefined to "the tension between two different business models: running- the- business versus changing- the-business".

2.1.2 Individual ambidexterity

Ambidextrous organizations need individual ambidexterity for both non-managerial employees (Mom, Fourné & Jansen, 2015; O'Reilly & Tusham, 2008; Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008; Rosing & Zacher, 2017) and ambidextrous managers (Mom et al., 2015), including executives (O'Reilly & Tushman, 1996) to lead organisations in complex environments.

Individual ambidexterity was conceptualised by Gibson & Birkinshaw (2004). Booth (2018) summarises the literature on internal and external factors affecting individual ambidexterity based on Lavie, Stettner & Tushman (2010)'s work. The internal factors include; organisational culture, strategy, rewards and recognition systems amongst others. Factors external to the individual include decision rights, tenure within the organisation and mindset amongst others.

The debate on individual ambidexterity has moved from whether or not it is possible for an individual to do both (Gupta et al., 2006) to a view that individuals must explore and exploit and separation is impractical (Birkinshaw & Gupta; 2013; Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008). The latest research goes further to suggest that it is critical for individuals to do both for ambidexterity to work (Rosing & Zacher, 2017). Despite this, literature on individual ambidexterity (Kauppila & Tempelaar, 2016; Rosing, Frese & Bausch 2011; Rosing & Zacher, 2017) and non-managerial employees' level individual ambidexterity (Alghamdi, 2018; Kauppila & Tempelaar, 2016 and Rosing & Zacher, 2017) research is still conceptual and there is a need for more empirical studies.

2.2 Leadership

2.2.1 Antecedents and current position

Leadership is important in ensuring organizational ambidexterity is successfully implemented (Smith, 2014). Nieto-Rodriguez (2014) proposed an empirically tested framework to address the challenge of simultaneously running and changing the organization. One of these pillars is leadership which the author argues is "where everything starts and ends in an organization". This was echoed by Tushman, Smith & Binns (2011) who posits leaders as the "secret sauce" to making organizational ambidexterity work. The role of leadership in innovation is also supported by other researchers such as Eisenbeiss, van Knippenberg & Boerner (2008).

Leadership is an evolving phenomenon which can be defined as a "…influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes and outcomes that reflect their shared purpose" (Daft & Lane, 2011). While some researchers and practitioner distinguish between leadership and management (Daft & Lane, 2011). Mintzberg (2004) argues against such an arbitrary separation because in practice, all three levels of a hierarchical organisation manage and lead. In line with this recommendation, these two terms will be used interchangeably in this paper.

Early leadership theories include the "great man theory" which viewed leaders as naturally born leaders who single handedly made things happen, the "trait theory" which sought the find consistent characteristics of good leaders in all contexts (Daft & Lane, 2011). "Behavioral

theories" focused more on what the leaders do, after failing to find the traits which predict successful leadership outcomes. Rosing et al. (2011) also reviewed the link between innovation and initiating structure and consideration leadership behaviors (Fleishman, 1953). These traditional theories, were focused on the individual, "leader" and paid little to no attention on the perspectives of followers and the four possible contexts which are; "stability", "crisis", "dynamic equilibrium", and "edge of chaos" (Daft & Lane, 2011; Osborn, Hunt, & Jauch, 2012) and paid no attention to the leadership which is more of a process as opposed to a specific individual (Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey, 2007); Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). These authors challenged researchers to update literature with newer, more relevant leadership models.

More recent leadership models include transactional and transformational leadership (Bass, 1999), leader member exchange (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) and authentic leadership (Avolio & Luthans, 2003; Avolio, Walumbwa & Weber, 2009), complexity leadership (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2008), paradox leadership (Smith, 2014) and leadership for adaptability (Uhl-Bien& Arena, 2018). A discussion of these new models of leadership is included below.

2.2.2   Leadership and ambidexterity

Most of the recent studies looking at the link between a specific leadership style and innovation such as Eisenbeiss, van Knippenberg & Boerner (2008) were focused on transformational leadership (Rosing et. al, 2011) while other studies focused on the link between the effectiveness of transactional or transformational leadership style in ambidextrous organisational contexts (Jansen, George, Van den Bosch & Volberda, 2008 ; Nemanich & Vera, 2009 ; Chang, 2016 ; Baškarada, Cromarty & Watson, 2016; Khalili, 2016; Kelly & Zuraik, 2019). These studies have shown mixed results, some positive, some neutral and others showed negative results (Rosing et al., 2011). Arena & Uhl-Bien (2018) also argued that transformational leadership, is more suitable for change in stable contexts and may not be appropriate for ongoing change required for organisational ambidexterity. Other researchers have argued that there is. Despite these arguments, transactional and transformational leadership styles are set as moderating factors in quantitative studies on ambidextrous leadership (Rosing et al., 2011) and individual ambidexterity (Rosing & Zacher, 2017).

Leader-member exchange theory considers two equally important perspectives, the leader's perspective and the follower's perspective, that should be understood (Graen and Uhl-Bien,1995; Mueller et al., 2018). Rosing et al. (2011) proposed that future quantitative studies consider the possible interaction of this leadership style also consider the leader member exchange as a moderating factor.

Scheepers and Storm (2019)'s recent study on the link between authentic leadership and ambidexterity found a significant positive impact of this leadership style organisation performance however this literature is developing. Further research is required before one can conclude on the appropriateness of this leadership style to ambidextrous organisational contexts. Denison, Hooijberg & Quinn (1995) While the paradox theory lens has been used to understand the tensions from exploiting and exploring at the organizational level (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2010; Smith & Lewis, 2011) more recent studies are applying the paradox lens to management or leadership level (Amason, 1996; Smith, 2014; Schad, Lewis, Raisch & Smith, 2016; Kauppila & Templelaar, 2016). Paradoxical leadership combines the leader's strong management with support (Kauppila & Templelaar, 2016). These studies have shown a positive impact on this leadership style on organisational performance. However, this is a relatively new field of study which requires further studies.

Arena & Uhl-Bien (2018) conceptualised a new process-based leadership framework which replaces their 2007 "complexity leadership" framework. The main components adaptive leadership include three forms of leadership (administrative, enabling and entrepreneurial leadership), an adaptive space and conflicting and interacting behaviors. The authors argue that their new framework addressed some of the challenges inherent in the leadership models. For example, this new construct is more collaborative and decentralised thus not hierarchical. This construct integrates the "in disparate literatures across a range of fields" (Arena & Uhl-Bien, 2018). The authors also recommended organisations pursuing adaptability to review and align rewards and benefits the objectives to exploit and explore.

2.2.3   Ambidextrous Leadership

Ambidextrous leadership was conceptualised by Rosing et al., (2011). It is defined as "the ability to foster both explorative and exploitative behaviors in followers..." through flexibly switching between opening and closing behaviors. Opening behaviors include; and closing

behaviors include. Rosing et. Al (2011) compared transformational and transactional leadership behaviors to the "opening" and "closing behaviors" behaviors of ambidextrous leadership and found that although similar, these two leadership models were not the same.

Ambidextrous leadership is argued to be undervalued but useful way for an organization to achieve better results than the competition through leadership actions on the micro level (Mueller et.al. 2018). The outcomes of leadership ambidexterity include individual employees and team innovation which feeds into the organization's performance (Rosing et al., 2011).

The importance of contextual ambidexterity and individual ambidexterity increases the importance of top managers leadership style which: creates an appropriate culture (Kauppila & Tempelaar, 2016) breaks down silos (Rogan & Mors, 2014); allocates resources appropriately (O'Reilly & Tushman, 1996) ; designs appropriate human resources systems (Ahammad Faisal, Mook Lee, Malul, & Shoham, 2015; Patel et al., 2013) specifically job designs (Parker, 2014). An inappropriate leadership style is more detrimental to exploration projects compared to exploitative which are not affected (Burton, O'Reilly& Bidwell, 2012).

In conclusion, there are a few leadership styles which have been tested in ambidextrous organizational contexts. Some have shown mixed results, others showed positive results from a few studies and others have not yet been tested. One can therefore argue that further research is required to understand further the leadership style which here are various leadership models.

2.3   Strategy Implementation
Most organizations fail to fully deliver on the set strategic objectives (Bonoma & Crittenden, 1998; Johnson, 2004; Kaplan & Norton, 2005; Mankins & Steele, 2005). Kaplan and Norton (2005) reported failure rates from different studies ranged between 60 percent and 90 percent.

Although there is no consensus definition of strategy implementation (Tiemersma, 2015), proposed Yang, Sun & Eppler (2008)'s definition which the author argued reflected the many approaches from literature. Yang et al. (2008)'s defines strategic implementation as "complex approach, which is comprised of a series of decisions and activities by managers and

employees – affected by a number of internal and external factors – to turn strategic plans into reality in order to achieve strategic objectives".

The reasons for poor implementation reported in strategy literature are many (Tiemersma, 2015). The most frequently mentioned reasons including the most cited researchers are as follows; unclear strategic objectives (Hrebiniak, 2006); an inappropriate leadership style of top managers (Beer & Eisenstat, 2000; MacLennan, 2011); inappropriate culture (Lorange, 1998); management processes not aligned to strategic objectives (Kaplan & Norton, 2005); workforce do not understand the strategic objectives (O'Corrbui & Corboy, 1999; Kaplan & Norton, 2005); poor communication (Okumus, 2003) especially poor vertical communication (Beer & Eisenstat, 2000); not motivating staff to deliver on the set objectives (Ivancic, 2013).

2.4   Middle Management Theory

Middle management is "the intermediate management of a hierarchical organization that is subordinate to the executive management and responsible for at least two lower levels of junior staff" (Aucoin, 1989). The middle manager's relative position means they are led and also lead others (Stoker, 2006). They are closer to the operations compared to top managers but are also removed from everyday work which is the responsibility of line managers (Huy, 2001). While some middle managers are head of functions, others lead business units hence responsible the unit's strategic plans derived from the organisations' vision and strategy (Browne, 2014).

The strategic role of middle managers which was conceptualised by Floyd & Wooldridge (1992) includes the following three tasks; (i) *articulating tactics and allocating budgets that are necessary for achieving a strategy*, (ii) *monitoring the performance of individuals and groups who are tasked with strategy implementation*, and (iii) *taking corrective measures when behavior falls below expectations.*

Extant literature affirm the importance of the middle manager in the strategy formulation and implementation process in all organisations including "flatter" organizations (Floyd & Wooldridge,1992) and in uncertain environments where strategy in emergent as opposed to planned (Mintzberg, 1979 ; Balogun & Johnson, 2004). However, top manager support (Higgs and Rowland, 2010, Axtell et al., 2000) or empowerment (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1994) is a critical enabler for middle managers effective performance. In terms of an inadequate top

management leadership style, found inadequate support for middle managers as one of the obstacles to successful strategy delivery (Corboy and O'Corrbui, 1999; MacLennan, 2011).

Some studies have shown that middle managers perform better when they received "information flow" support from top managers (Aqueveque, Drago & Torres, 2015). Leader support was found to positively predict proactive behavior such as idea implementation. Lack of top manager support may impact negatively on the middle managers wellbeing (Paris, Vickers & Wilkes, 2008) or may lead to burn out (Buick & Thomas, 2001).

2.5 Middle managers in ambidextrous organisational contexts

The few studies on the contribution of middle managers in ambidextrous organisational affirm the importance of this level of management (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004; Kauppila & Tempelaar, 2016). For example, Kauppila and Tempelaar (2016) found that middle managers are well positioned to foster an appropriate learning environment for individual ambidexterity, but incentive schemes were a key enabler to promote individual employee short-term exploitation and long-term exploration activities. Aqueveque, Torres & Drago (2015) also found that top management support with information resulted in middle manager's sustainable performance and better strategic decision making in ambidextrous contexts.

The scope of middle managers role and the importance of strategic implementation of strategy would warrant interest from ambidexterity leadership researchers. However, Burgess et al., (2015) found that research is still heavily skewed towards top management (Smith, 2014; Tushman, Smith & Binns, 2011; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2011; Zuraik & Kelly, 2019) and top management teams (Jansen, Kostopoulos, Mihalache, & Papalexandris , 2016) despite Luscher and Lewis (2008)'s call for more studies focused on middle managers, more than a decade prior.

3 Research Methodology

The research design chosen was based on exploratory qualitative study that employs both inductive and deductive elements.

3.1 Philosophy

An interpretivist research philosophy was applied. This is because the aspect of practical implications of the ambidextrous leadership for middle managers is under-researched and conflicting views of middle managers' roles and support mechanisms exist in strategy and management literature. The researcher explored the phenomena in context, i.e. discussing the paradoxical challenges and dilemmas experienced by individual middle managers striving to explore and exploit, equally well and simultaneously.

Because of the interpretivist nature of the research, the researcher played a critical role in data collection. To ensure that this role did not bias the process, the researcher was conscious and mindful of her own values and point of view (Saunders & Lewis, 2012) when conducting the interview.

3.2 Approach

The research questions used to collect the data fit a phenomenology research design because the objective of each question was to get an in-depth understanding of the research problem (Estabrooks, Field & Morse, 1994). An abductive approach, which involves inductive and deductive approaches to complement the extant literature was used. Inductive reasoning is described as "the logical process of establishing a general proposition on the basis of observation of particular facts" (Zikmund, Babin, Carr & Griffin, 2012). The deductive approach is described as the testing of a theoretical proposition to validate it and involves the development, operationalisation, analysis and confirmation of the theory (Saunders & Lewis, 2012).

For example, there is sparse literature on leadership ambidexterity focused on middle managers (Luscher & Lewis, 2008), so an inductive bottom-up approach was used to draw insights from middle managers' lived experiences. On the other hand, there is extant literature on middle management in the strategy process (Mintzberg, 1985; Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000) and top managers' ambidexterity (Mueller *et al.*, 2018), thus a deductive approach is more suitable and will augment the insights from the inductive analysis.

A qualitative research method was chosen because it allowed the researcher to add to the literature on the lived experiences of middle managers, as both leaders and followers, and the support they get in the face of these challenges, thus fill the following research gaps (i) empirical qualitative research methodology on ambidextrous leadership (Baškarada *et al.*,

2016), (ii) a follower's perspective on ambidextrous leadership (Mueller *et al.*, 2018) and (iii) middle managers in ambidextrous organisational contexts (Luscher & Lewis, 2008). Moreover, qualitative research allows the researcher to add depth to the research results through critical analysis, interpretation and the drawing of meaning and insights from the research findings (Suter, 2011). The choice of method is supported by Nkomo & Hoobler (2015), who recommended qualitative research as the most suitable approach where there is sparse literature or for a relatively new research field.

3.3 Purpose of research design

The purpose of the research design was explorative because the researcher needed the flexibility to ask different questions, and to ask them differently, while interviewing each of the participants. This is because each participant's experience is unique, so being able to ask relevant follow up questions unconstrained was helpful and the researcher's ability to probe further added to the depth of the findings, which then filtered to the discussions and recommendations (Saunders & Lewis, 2012).

3.4 Time horizon

A cross-sectional study was performed, despite the call for more longitudinal research (Booth, 2018) because only six months were allocated to the researcher to complete the study, in fulfilment of the requirements of the Masters in Business Administration (MBA) programme. It is not practical to conduct a longitudinal study in such a short space of time. This is supported by Saunders & Lewis (2012), who recommend a cross-sectional study if data is to be collected from participants in only one short period of time, as was the case in this research.

3.5 Techniques and procedures

Face-to-face, one-on-one interviews were conducted with twelve (**12)** middle managers at their places of work and two experts in the field of middle management. This technique was chosen to facilitate meaningful dialogue between the researcher and the participants. Moreover, the face-to-face interviews gave the interviewer an opportunity to observe the participants' body language and non-verbal cues which added depth to interpreting the responses and findings of this research (Yin, 2011). For example, there was a general discomfort when participants answered questions on challenges of leading self (personal challenges), so the researcher would see the discomfort in the body language of participants and would then empathetically acknowledge their uneasiness before asking for permission to

continue with the interview. All the participants agreed to proceed with the interview and each one of them freely shared his/her personal challenges.

The researcher interviewed two experts in the field of middle management post coding, as a way to augment the relatively sparse literature on middle managers in ambidextrous organisational contexts. The interviews with the experts focused on exploring the findings from the data in order to affirm or disconfirm the findings. The insights also helped to give more nuance to the dynamics of middle management.

The researcher used semi-structured questions because this format of questioning gave room for follow-on questions, as opposed to the preset questions required in a structured interview (Saunders & Lewis, 2012). These follow-up questions further explored the participants' responses to the research questions. The questions gave all the participants a platforms and prominent positions to contribute to the research findings by individually sharing their lived experiences. Moreover, the semi-structured interview format created a natural flow of the conversation between the participants and the researcher (Barriball & While, 1994). This was necessary to capture all the participants' unique perspectives, as shaped by their respective organisations. The participants were drawn from different types of financial companies (banking and insurance) and functions (sales, operations, IT) and some were business unit heads. As a result, the findings of the research consists of the aggregated interview responses pertaining to all the participants' personal experiences.

The researcher ensured comfort and confidence in the interview process for all the participants by asking at the start of each interview for each one's consent to record the proceedings. The researcher also connected with the participants by sharing her own experience, when asked to do so by the participants. Moreover, at the start of each interview, the researcher explained to the participants their rights to withdraw from the interviews, if they felt uncomfortable for whatever reason. Giving room for flexibility put the participants at ease to then openly share their personal accounts.

The researcher was thorough in making sure all the participants met the qualifying criteria. As a result, the researcher stopped one interview after 15 minutes because the participant did not meet the qualifying criteria. This happened despite prior communication on the

requirements for participation, such as being in a position relatively high up the corporate ladder, and signing an acknowledgement of receipt of the interview request letter which clearly set out the requirements for individual ambidexterity. As such, it was only those participants who met the set criteria who were able to share their lived experiences in managing strategic tension or paradoxes from exploiting and exploring.

The interview recordings were carefully stored and this proved useful when the researcher was checking the accuracy of the quotes which were presented in the research findings (Barriball & While, 1994). The researcher and the all the participants co-signed a non-disclosure agreement with a confidentiality clause.

3.6 Research methodology and design
3.6.1 Population
Population refers to an entire collection of group members (Saunders & Lewis, 2012). The population for this research study was individual middle managers working for financial services companies (large insurers or large banks) in the South African financial services industry. The population, across all companies had head offices in Gauteng, the second largest province of the South African financial services industry (Businesstech, 2018). The researcher chose the companies and industry because of their significance to the South African economy and the recent changes in the industry, which create an ambidextrous context.

The financial services industry is significant to the country's economy - 22% of the country's 2018 $349 million Gross Domestic Product (GDP) came from financial services companies (Brand South Africa, 2017). The ambidextrous context is as a result of the expected changes in the industry's structure for incumbents. Most financial services incumbents tend to be mature and large - economies of scale are required to offset the significant regulatory and capital costs faced by banks and insurers (KPMG, 2019).

The size of the organisation was also important because the literature suggests that large/big corporates are more at risk of inertia. Ambidexterity is most useful in resource-rich (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013), large organisations (Yu & Khessina, 2012; Lin, Yun & Demirkan, 2007), where competitive rivalry is high and the business environment is uncertain (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). Moreover, in the financial sector, companies have to achieve scale. The classification will take into account the number of employees and annual revenue.

These large incumbents have a higher risk of being disrupted when the environment of business is changing, because new players often come in and take away the unexploited growth opportunities. The incumbents tend to prioritise allocating resources to strengthen the existing business thus sacrifice new growth opportunities which would bring future success (Probst, Raisch & Tushman, 2011).

3.7 Unit of analysis

The unit of study for this research is individual middle managers working for an insurance company or a bank with set ambidextrous strategic intent to either create a competitive advantage or survive in the changing environment of business. The choice of participants assumed that middle managers are knowledgeable.

3.8 Sampling method and size

3.8.1 Sampling Method

Purposive sampling (a non-probability sampling method) technique was used because it was not practical for the researcher to get access to the complete list of middle managers working in insurance and banking companies (Saunders & Lewis, 2012). The researcher used her professional contacts within the financial services, in addition to personal contacts, to gain access to the research population. The purposive sampling method allows the researcher to make logical generalisations from the findings (Saunders & Lewis, 2012).

The size of the organisation was also important because the literature suggests that large/big corporates are more at risk of inertia. Ambidexterity is most useful in resource-rich (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013), large organisations (Yu & Khessina, 2012; Lin, Yun & Demirkan, 2007), where competitive rivalry is high and the business environment is uncertain (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). Moreover, in the financial sector, companies have to achieve scale. The classification will take into account the number of employees and annual revenue.

The researcher took the following measures to ensure that the qualifying criteria for participants were met. Firstly, the researcher conducted an online review of the target companies' strategies to ensure the inclusion of exploit and explore objectives. For example, one of the target companies' published strategic objectives stated: "*Extracting value through*

innovation and improved efficiencies", thus meeting the criteria for the research population. All the 12 participants' organisations met the set criteria.

Secondly, the researcher emailed the details of the participants' qualifying criteria to her personal networks for referrals.   The middle manager was defined as "an intermediate management of a hierarchical [organisation] that is subordinate to the executive management and responsible for at least two lower levels of junior staff" (Aucoin, 1989*). The researcher focused on middle managers in core business functions such as sales, IT and product development. These core business areas were chosen for the following reasons:

- Sales managers need to balance the existing channels which are already embedded in the operations of the company and are critical to continue to servicing existing customers, and the requirement to explore new digital channels and meet the customer's expectation to seamlessly engage with the company on various channels (omni channel).
- IT managers would experience significant tension from the management and supporting inefficient and under-utilized legacy systems that are core to current offers and the need to adopt new technology required for the support of the emerging digital channels.
- Marketing, particularly product managers, need to maintain and exploit existing products, which by nature of the business, have long product life cycles and explore new digital products and services that are required to ward off new entrants and meet changing customer needs.

Thirdly, the researcher sent an interview request letter to referred participants, before arranging for interviews. This step was made to ensure that only the participants who met the qualifying criteria detailed in the interview request letter were interviewed. The following is an extract of the wording from the letter which specified that the individual faced pressures to exploit and explore (run business and change business) in their role*; "The research explores your lived experience in managing strategic tensions and paradoxes that arise when your*

organisation explores new opportunities while managing the current business simultaneously."

Lastly, the first part of each interview was used to validate that the participants met the qualifying criteria. The researcher asked questions on the strategy, organisational structure and where the participant fit into the structure and his/her role within the company.

An example of the organisational objectives, as shared by a participant, which met the ambidextrous organisational context was stated thus: to "maintain, grow and build". The participant's response that "*strategic implementation/execution and tactical plans of both exploit and explore objectives*", was used to confirm the he/she faced pressures to exploit and explore.

The data collection methods that were used in this study were; semi-structured, face-to-face and one-on-one interviews, which were conducted with each participant at his/her place of work. The duration of each interview, ranged between 60 and 90 minutes. The data were then fully transcribed before being analysed. Although all the questions were discussed in each of the 12 interviews, the level of discussion differed greatly from participant to participant. Similarly, there was a disproportionate time spent on each question. Overall, the questions on "being led" stimulated more discussion compared to the other two research questions which were discussed for more than half of the interview. However, it was observed that there were often enlightening responses to questions pertaining to the challenges that middle managers experienced when leading. In response to one such question, three middle managers readily shared some challenges of leading, thus showing the link between some of the challenges of being led and leading others. This is to be expected because one of the factors that influence individual ambidexterity is organisational factors and poor top leadership ambidexterity.

3.8.2   Sample size

Qualitative research typically involves the use of small samples. Creswell (1998) recommends a sample size that ranges between 12 and 18 interviews. Guest, Bunce & Johnson (2006) also propose a minimum sample of 12. Taking these recommendations into account, the researcher had targeted 18 interviews of up to 90 minutes each. However, the actual number of interviews held was **12,** because both data and coding saturation were reached after the 12th interview. The researcher established data saturation because very little new information emerged from the 12th interview. The graph below illustrates the cumulative number of unique codes after specific interviews.The researchers established saturation from the slowing of new codes and major themes. 61 codes were added after the first 7 interviews, 8 codes were added after coding the 8th interview but only 14 additional coded were added from interview 9, 10 and 11. Only two additional codes were added after analysing the 12th interview but no new themes were derived so coding saturation was reached after the 12th interview.

Cummulative number of unique codes after specific Interviews
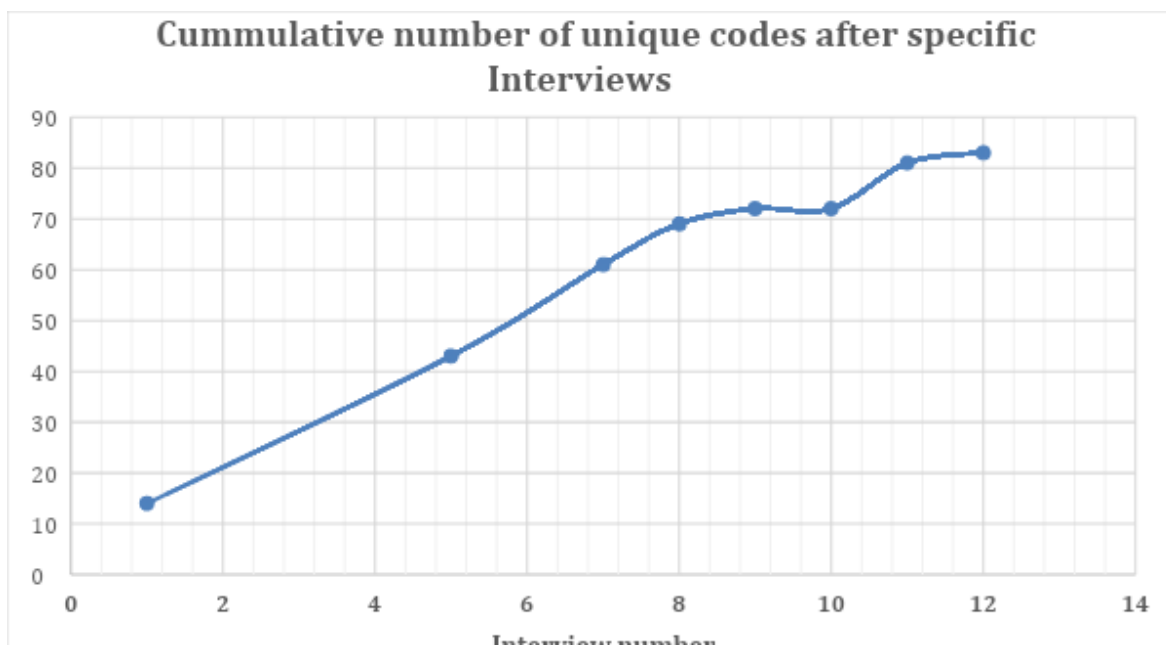
As can be seen from the graph above, the rate at which new codes were created started declining after the 10th interview and only two codes, representing 1% of the developed code, were added in the 12th interview.

The length of each interview varied. All the interviews were longer than 40 minutes and did not last more than 90 minutes, which was consistent with the time commitment which was communicated to participants in the interview request letter and the consent forms which the respondents signed at before the s interviews were conducted.

The researcher interviewed two experts in the field of middle management post coding as a way to augment the relatively sparse literature on middle managers in ambidextrous organisational contexts. These expert respondents published a white paper on middle managers, and are currently involved in research consulting or training-based interventions to assist middle managers. The interviews with the experts focused on exploring the findings from the data in order to affirm or disconfirm the findings. The insights also helped to give more nuance to the dynamics of middle management.

3.9   The research instrument

The interview schedule was designed to provide a loose structure for data collection across all interviews and to enhance the reliability of the research results. This is because interview schedules need to allow for consistency in the data collection process (Zikmund, 2003). The design of the schedule included a short list of structured open-ended questions derived from the research questions. The questions were designed to be clear, with tight wording. Once the schedule was developed and approved by the ethics committee, the researcher used it to get feedback from two pilot interviews.

Pilot interviews were conducted with two middle managers so that the researcher could fine tune the interview schedule and interviewer techniques (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Saunders & Lewis, 2012). The pilot interviews were also used to test the length of the interview and were conducted as if they were data collection interviews. For example, the interviewer obtained the participants' consent and took notes during the interview. The interviewer recorded the time taken to go through each of the three questions.

The feedback from the two pilot interviews was used to make a number of changes to the interview schedule and proposed data process. Firstly, a broad script of the introduction detailing the purpose of the interview and an outline of the different parts was created. Similar wording was incorporated into the interview request letter. One could argue that this would

create biased responses. However, this was critical, given the complexity of the constructs. Secondly, the researcher introduced a reflection part, which allowed the participants to summarise and reflect on their key take away based on the detailed discussion during the course of the interviews.

3.10 Data gathering process

The data was collected as audio recordings of semi-structured interviews and field notes made by the researcher during the interview process. The interview was broken into three broad parts namely: introduction, research questions and, finally, conclusion and reflection. Details of each of the three parts are included below.

The researcher started each formal interview with an informal social chat to build rapport, as recommended by Leech (2002). The researcher then asked easy high-level questions on the business environment, before getting into the company strategy; the organisational structure and levels, including each participant's position within these. The researcher then asked questions on the participant's role and the role of his/her manager in the formulation and implementation of the organisation's strategy. This first part of the interview served as a check for ambidexterity intent and the qualifying criteria for the unit of analysis, the middle manager.

As discussed previously, one of the participants did not meet the qualifying criteria, so the researcher thanked the individual for his/her time, before explaining that he/she did not meet the criteria for the interview, thus ending the conversation. The participant was comfortable with the feedback because the researcher had communicated at the start of the interview process the slim possibility of not continuing with the interviews if the qualifying criteria were not met.

This experience highlights the need for a more rigorous process for ambidexterity participant selection. The interviewer made great efforts to avoid a situation such as this, as detailed in the process followed to select participants. However, such situations are normal in the course of research. For example, quantitative research sets the qualifying criteria of a questionnaire upfront, and those participants that do not meet the criteria cannot continue with the questionnaire.

The section on the research questions was then structured to get results for each of the three research questions in turn. All follow on questions, where necessary, were based on the participant's last response and were designed to probe further and gain deeper insights

(Barriball & While, 1994). Repeat questions were avoided, except once or twice when the participant explicitly asked the researcher to repeat the question. In these few instances, the researcher rephrased the question. The low occurrence of such requests, affirmed that the researcher was actively engaged with the participants. The researcher also used the feedback from the earlier interviews to improve questions. In later interviews, the researcher used the opportunity afforded by qualitative research to probe topics that were shared in earlier interviews.

Time ran out in one of the 12 interviews despite the researchers best efforts to round it off within the allocated time. Five minutes before the allocated time lapsed the researcher had indicated to the participant that time was running out, however, the respondent was still sharing a personal experience. To ensure professionalism, the researcher allowed the participant to finish off, then stopped recording. However, before the researcher could leave the room, the participant asked to continue with an informal discussion. The content of this discussion was not taken into account in the findings.

3.11 Analysis approach

The analysis followed the "codes to theory model for qualitative inquiry" adapted process from Saldana (2009). An inductive analysis, which involves the researcher immersing themselves into the data and extracting codes from the data as opposed to using pre-conceived codes, was undertaken (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This is because the objective of the research was to get insights on how middle managers manage the tensions when implementing organisational ambidexterity and hence; build on the existing ambidexterity leadership theory. Each transcript was first free read twice before the researcher used pen and paper to code both value and in-vivo codes.   A list of the descriptive codes and the in-vivo codes was highlighted. The researcher then added the list of codes into excel for analysis. Excel was chosen for analysis as it allows the researcher to spend more time getting into the data. The descriptive codes were grouped into the three research questions and then further grouped into relevant themes, based on relevant theory from the literature view. The relationships between categories (code groups) was then analysed and grouped into themes (super groups). All the themes then informed the finding on the

challenges faced by middle managers when being lead and leading others and the coping mechanisms they engaged in.

To ensure factual accuracy, all interviews were recorded and copies of the recordings, transcripts and field notes were labelled and stored where they could be retrieved on request. To ensure interpretive validity, the data was coded to include in-vivo codes – which are quotations that use the participants' own words, next to each value code. The researcher kept a research journal, which served as an audit trail of all decisions made during the data analysis process. All versions of reviews to the problem statement and the research questions will be archived and reviewed from time to time as part and parcel of the researcher's reflections on the research journey.

3.12 Limitations of Methodology

There are inherent limitations in all research and this study is no exception. Firstly, the qualitative nature of the research and the abductive approach of the analysis, introduced the author's subjective interpretation which would then filter through to the findings (Saunders & Lewis, 2012). To enhance the validity of the findings, the author disclosed the details of the process that was followed in collecting and analysing the data. Furthermore, the findings include in-vivo codes, which are participants' own words that are used to support the findings. Further research can reduce this subjectivity further by creating a team of researchers who can code these interviews independently to check and challenge the validity of the findings (Saunders & Lewis, 2012).

Secondly, the interview data was collected from the lived experiences of the middle managers and hence; it represents the self-reported experiences of participants, which may introduce bias (Saunders & Lewis, 2012).To overcome this challenge, future research may include a multilevel review in which the lived experiences of the top managers, the middle managers who report to these top managers and the line middle managers who report to the middle managers will be recorded and compared, as recommended by Eisenhardt & Graebner

(2007). For example, to validate and understand the "multi-generation" challenges, explorative research can focus on the experiences and challenges of different generations of employees and in exploiting and exploring. This is supported by Mueller *et al.'s* (2018) call for studies involving all layers of the organisation.

Thirdly, the aim of qualitative analysis is to describe the phenomenon fully and in detail (Saunders & Lewis, 2012). As such, generalisations and inferences can be derived from these findings. However, the findings can form the basis of hypothesis for future quantitative research or research questions for qualitative research to explore the emerging concepts. For example, the findings on the support for middle management, can be used to explore the gaps in leadership education and development for managers thus closing the gap as recommended by (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

Fourthly, the findings are based on an integration of the shared experiences of the participants. This means that not all participants experienced these challenges, in fact, some of those reported positive experiences. Future research can focus on comparative case studies of organisations that are successful at creating the conditions for the middle managers and those that are not.

Fifthly, the findings in this research are supported to a great extent by existing literature from different disciplines thus highlighting the siloed efforts amongst researchers who delve into leadership in ambidextrous organisational contexts. This is a similar finding to that of Uhl-Bien & Arena (2018), who found the need to build a holistic framework of current literature that focuses on leadership. To overcome this, future researchers from different disciplines should collaborate and integrate their insights and knowledge for a deeper understanding and

create "meta-theory" of middle managers in ambidextrous contexts in particular and ambidexterity in general.

Sixthly, Nosella, Cantarello & Filippini (2012) highlight the importance of a longer term understanding of how managers manage challenges in ambidextrous contexts, compared to a snapshot view. For example, the findings on multi-generational challenges are emerging and the impact of this dynamic will most likely compound as more and more millennials enter the workforce, while the older generations exit. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies which track challenges across a number of years.

Finally, the research population was from one industry and in a particular country. Geerts *et al.* (2010), found differences in ambidexterity between manufacturing and service firms. Future research can do empirical studies to see if these differences translate into differences in the challenges faced by middle managers in these different firms or industries. Moreover, one of the smaller findings of this research was the implication of culture on lower level employees' ambidexterity, as such, further research should be done in different countries with different national cultures (Alghamdi, 2018).

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5 APPENDIX 1
Author guidelines of the journal (attached as separate document).

6 APPENDIX 2
Example of an article from the journal (attached as separate document)

7 APPENDIX 3

Interview Schedule

Qualifying criteria and context

1) What is the company's strategy?

2) What is the company's high-level structure/organogram? Where you fit in?

3) What challenges do middle managers face as "followers" of top management when executing on organizational ambidexterity?

RQ1: What challenges do middle managers face as "followers", led by the top managers in ambidextrous organizational contexts?

1) Tell me about your experience working with your manager to execute on both exploiting and exploration strategic objectives.

2) What role does your manager play?

3) What challenges did you face as a follower led by your manager?

RQ2: What challenges do middle managers face as "leaders" leading their subordinates in an ambidextrous organisational contexts?

1) Switching to your role as a leader, tell me about your experience leading them to execute these same exploiting and exploration strategic objectives?

2) What role do you play?

3) What challenges did you faced as leader follower led by your manager?

RQ3: What support measures do middle managers need in ambidextrous organisational contexts?

1) What support did you get in the face of these challenges?