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Key Finding

Interactions in secrecy enhance psychological safety and can empower middle managers to initiate change.

Business Application

Awareness of the opaque mechanisms of decision-making can motivate top executives to bring hidden discourse to the surface.

Based on interviews with middle and top managers at leading multinationals, I explore the secret approach to initiating change that is carried out by middle managers. I focus on secret-telling interactions in which middle managers frame information about their change proposal as exclusive, select the secrecy recipient from among top management, and specify the exclusivity rules – usually a commitment or promise to guard the secret. I examine the emergence phase of the change journey when actors have not yet mobilised resources to introduce their proposals for change, and argue that whereas secret interactions positively influence the likelihood of change, open interactions produce uncertain change outcomes.

More specifically, I investigate the empowering effect of secret actions by middle managers who choose to initiate change under unfavourable conditions. My findings fill a gap in current studies that mainly discuss under what (optimal) conditions middle managers would proceed towards action. The emergent model highlights four main mechanisms that determine the likelihood of secret actions resulting in the receptivity of the top management team to change: (1) secret actions as attention-management; (2) secret actions as a way of ensuring psychological safety; (3) secret actions as enablers of sensegiving; and (4) secret actions as a means to encourage resource exchange. Finally, my findings suggest that, depending on how carefully middle managers handle the involvement process, their secret actions can have opposing effects on organisational inertia.

In short, top managers must accept and be aware of interactions in secrecy, and effectively bring the hidden discourse to the surface.

Read more:

Toegel, I. (2018), "How middle managers use secrecy to initiate change", IMD Working Paper.

Toegel, I. (2017), "How to create a high-performance team: Top tips for better collaboration", Tomorrow's Challenges, November 2017.

Toegel, I., and Lane, N. (2017), "Leading through emotion", Insights@IMD, October 2017, 6-17.

Ina Toegel is Professor of Leadership and Organisational Change at IMD. Before taking her PhD at INSEAD, she worked at the World Bank on structuring public-private partnerships in infrastructure.



Research interests:

organisational change, in-team and cross-team dynamics, emotion management in high-performance teams