

Barriers to implementing sustainability experienced by middle managers in the Fast Moving Consumer Goods and Retail sector

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This contribution summarises the results of an empirical study exploring the nature of the barriers to implementing sustainability experienced by middle managers in the Fast-Moving Consumer Goods and Retail sector. It focuses on how this experience is related to leadership practices and strategic management processes, and how these affect agencies of these middle managers (MM) concerning sustainability implementation within their own organisations. Given the paucity of existing empirical research, an initial study conducted interviews with 18 MMs from 14 companies in the FMCG&R sector was chosen. Where MM report perceived deficits in leadership, referring to clarity of communicated direction and commitment their interpretations and subsequent agentic behaviour was dependent on their perception of the role of top management. Where top management was considered by MM to be responsible in general for resolving strategic questions (command-and-control), and more specifically, for addressing ambiguities between strategic priorities, levels of agency reported by MM concerning sustainability implementation were low. From the perspective of formal management systems within organisations with high levels of target-setting and low levels of planned strategic freedom, MM agency was low where sustainability objectives were excluded from performance management and reward systems. Agency was also low where sustainability objectives were not seen by MM as compatible with broader strategic or financial objectives for which they were responsible. Agency was reported where MMs adapted planned sustainability initiatives which were viewed as being culturally incompatible with local social conditions and corresponding MM perceptions. Agency regarding sustainability implementation through MM was reported as high in a small number of interviews, where leadership was perceived as providing broad, unambiguous high-level guidance concerning priorities and trade-offs, and where a history of distributed leadership existed across functions and was valid for both business and sustainability topics. MM exercised a high-level of agency, strategy was often emergent and occurred at MM levels with the organisation, while stakeholder engagement was higher than in other interviews, particularly regarding influencing suppliers, competitors and customers to adopt sustainable practices.