

Communication Challenges and Managing Expectations in Indian Supply Chain and Logistics Networks: A View from Middle Management

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ABSTRACT

The need to study the dynamics of behavioural interventions, such as communication and cooperation is evidently found in the literature of supply chain and logistics agility. The major challenges remain in deciphering broad strategic organisational plans at a tactical level. The purpose of this study is to focus on the problems and challenges of middle managers in the context of Indian supply chain and logistics processes. This study was designed keeping in mind the perspectives presented by Badaracco and Webb (1995) on middle-level trenches. The data was analyzed using Denzin's interpretive interactionism and the Sandin and Fahy method. In addition, for bringing more lucidity, frequencies and percentages were used. The implications stand tall for organisations, middle managers, and academicians.

Keywords: Supply Chain Agility, Communication, Expectations, Compromises, Ethics.

1. INTRODUCTION

As supply chain and logistics management aim at getting the right products in the right quantities at the right time and in the right place at the right cost (Coyle *et al.*, 1996), their performance depends on providing better customer services and products at a low cost (Singh and Singh, 2008). In such pursuance, matters of communication have always been dear to business organisations. Abysmal communication can adversely affect the business propositions of organisations (Bao, 2008). It can make or damage organisational processes (Wienclaw, 2008), and hence plays a vital role in business organisations. Communication is also an integral process required in the successful management of networks of suppliers, manufacturers, distributors, retailers, and customers, and this comprises of forwarding materials from suppliers to customers and information surges multi directionally (Lamming, 1996). The nature of supply-chain networks ranges from simple to complex, to very complex. It depends upon several factors such as the capabilities and competence of collaborating suppliers, manufacturers, distributors and retailers to manage the business processes, the diversity of goods to be distributed, the availability

of right shared resources, and most important, the right communication that binds them all.

Over a period, the dimensions of supply chain management have changed to functional integration of logistic processes outside the firm, requiring multi-direction communication with suppliers and customers (Drake and Schlachter, 2008). Ganguly and Kundu (2008) presented that several independent organisations, in the present business scenario, ploy synergistic cross-functional communication for fulfilling the objectives of the business. As the firm's flexibility depends on its ability to communicate to ever-changing customers' requirements (Koste and Malhotra, 1999 Malhotra, 1999), it is a clear indication that the human resources need to align their communication competency with that of the changing expectations of business (Carmeli and Schaubroeck 2005). In addition, for attaining competitive advantage, Harrison *et al.* (2001) highlighted about a coalition among those involved in supply chain processes for success. Mutsuddi (2012) and Hugos (2003) deliberated on the importance of human resource management in supply chain management and focused on the need for a constant use of employee skills required for maintaining the agility of supply chain in the given competitive scenario. In pursuance of

profitability, there exists a critical relationship between human capital and the firm's flexibility (Yan, Margaret and Jennel, 2010). Gligor and Autry (2012) focused on employee relationships at individual levels that influences firm-to-firm communication, and presented the impact of personal relationships, such as friendships between employees of supply chain partner firms on business-related communication processes, and found a positive association between the two. Blome, Schoenherr and Rexhausen (2013) reviewed supply chain basics from resource-based perspectives and confirmed a significant moderating effect of individual abilities in enabling supply chain competence and agility. In understanding this, communication and cooperation were highlighted as integral elements in these enabling processes. Where Voigt and Inderfurth (2012) studied supply chain coordination with information sharing with trust and trustworthiness, Lee, So, and Tang (2000) emphasized the importance of information sharing. Poul, Carsten and Kim (2003) presented a case study to examine the impact of different levels of inter-organizational communication on supply chain performance. They considered the benefits of dyadic associations between a manufacturer and its upstream suppliers in the supply chain. They also suggested how organisations can use a quick response system (QRS) for enhancing supply chain performances in the context of Danish organisations. Xuan, van Donk, and van der Vaart (2011) focused on the role of information and communication technologies in supply chain processes. With the rise of computer-based communication technologies and the ever increasing importance of communication networks in supply chain management, Cutting-Decelle *et al.* (2007) presented a review of the chief approaches to supply chain communications with reference to manufacturing industries.

1.1. RESEARCH GAPS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

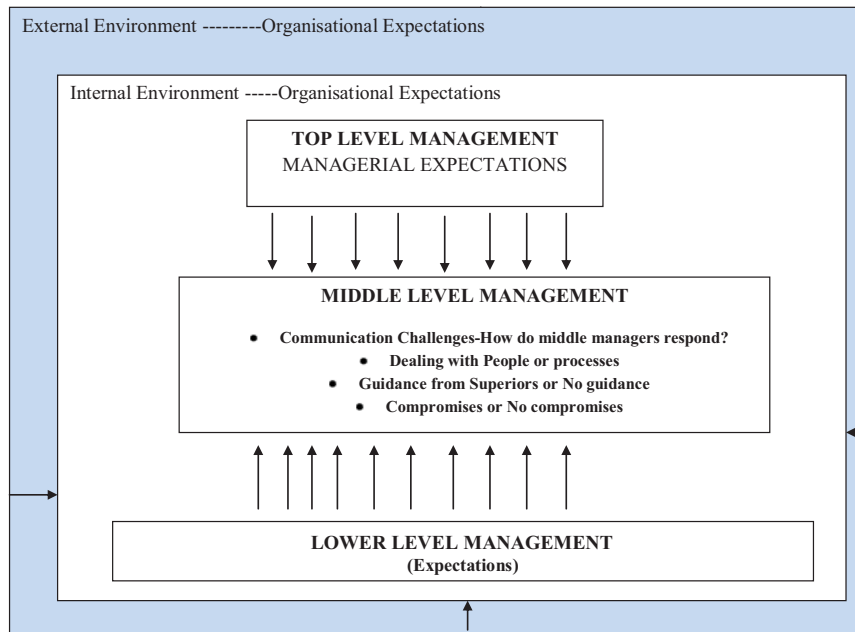
Communication plays a significant role in traditional and contemporary supply chain management (Gold, Seuring, and Beske, 2010). Argenti and Forman (2002) addressed the need for research based on the best practices of good corporate communication for an effective relationship between a firm and its stakeholders. Having this, organisations like Cisco understand that the right communication essentially brings mutual trust, as well as adequacies in personal and professional relationships. It also develops strong collaborations and integrated workflow, novelty, advances competence, smoothens collaboration, and reduces business risk, thereby bringing

ease in managing the expectations of all those involved in business processes (Cisco, 2013¹). Communication, hence, is vital to a well-organised supply chain (Cisco, 2013, Dyer and Singh, 1988). In the understanding of communication in supply chain processes, researchers have visited the concept of a supply chain from several perspectives. However, Gligor and Holcomb (2012) emphasized that much work has been done on supply chain agility from the technical perspective and there are clear needs to focus on behavioural interventions, such as communication, coordination, and cooperation in supply chain agility. Similarly, Oosterhuis, van der and Molleman (2012) emphasized the need to work upon complexities allied with routine communication in supply chains.

As the meanings in communication may be derived by either expression or implications, the degree of expression or implications grounds the context in communication as high or low (Hall, 1979). Where low-context communication is characterized by more expressed information, high-context communication comprises of implied information (Messener, 2008). Hence, most of the content in high context may differ in terms of its connotative and denotative meanings. India has high-context communication societies (Hall, 1979). International partners in communication with Indian firms find it difficult to decode Indian high-context communication, resulting in obscure, imperfect messages that are difficult to comprehend (Messener, 2008). Indian societal and cultural values have always been oriented towards harmonious group activities (Modh, 2005) representing collectivism, high-context communication (Nishimura, Nevgi and Tella, 2009) and amicability. The intentions for Indians to communicate are to maintain harmony and create relationships (Pakiam, 2007).

Further, the complexities in deciphering supply chain operations enhance when it comes to middle managers. Their position in the organisational hierarchy makes them accountable for deciphering broad strategic organisational plans as well as precise tactics useful in accomplishing organisational objectives (Bateman and Snell, 2003). This brings to them conditions of subsisting with several expectations not only from strategic managers, but also from front line managers and several other stakeholders associated with the supply chain network (as shown in Fig.1). Also, the wave of the existing business scenario characterized by globalization, and typified by varying

1 http://www.cisco.com/web/strategy/docs/manufacturing/cisco_connected_mfg.pdf (accessed on May 13, 2013 at 5:04PM)

Figure 1: Middle Level Management and Understanding Challenges

and escalating customer requirements, petite product life cycles, stretched lead times, escalating supply precariousness, and unpredictable market and customer demand enhances the need for effective organisational responsiveness (Gligor and Holcomb, 2012). Badaracco and Webb (1995) clearly highlighted the significance of middle-level (trench) viewpoint in organisational success and stated that besides several questionnaire-based studies, there are no in-depth examinations from the trenches as to how middle managers define, think, and resolve issues.

Given the scenario, the researcher felt the need to find answers to the following questions:

1. How do middle managers feel/think and define issues pertaining to human communication in supply chain processes?
 - a. What are the challenges in human communication with respect to Indian Supply Chain processes? In this pursuance, what are the communication challenges to middle managers in supply chain processes?
 - b. What is their major challenge -dealing with people or dealing with processes? Why?
 - c. What are the expectations of management and organisations? Do these expectations differ?

2. How do middle managers resolve issues pertaining to communication in supply chain processes?

- a. Do these managers find it a constraint to be responsive in their communication?
- b. Do these middle managers get support from their seniors? If yes, to what level?
- c. In the pursuance of these challenges and expectations, do middle managers make compromises in their actions? If yes, to what level?

Hence, the main aim of this study was to gain a generalizability by determining patterns of human experiences (feel/think, define and resolve) at middle-level management, pertaining to communication challenges and expectation management in Indian supply chain processes. A similar framework was used to study information from the trenches to pursue how young middle managers define, think, and resolve communication-related challenges, as well as managerial and organisational expectations with reference to supply chain processes. In furtherance of this, Gligor and Holcomb's proposition was qualitatively elaborated, which explains the impact of behavioural interventions like communication (responsiveness) and cooperation in Indian supply chain and logistics processes.

2. METHODOLOGY

To understand these dynamics, we conducted semi-structured interviews of 53 middle managers and work persons engaged in supply chain and logistics operations. These semi-structured interactions allowed us in-depth exploration between different contexts and categories. Qualitative methodologies appropriately address the research based on interpretive paradigm (Martin *et al.*, 2005). Purposive sampling was used for the reasons of its effective use in the generalizability of results (Cook and Campbell, 1979). Researchers permitted the use of small sample size in the context of purposive sampling (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Most of the managers belonging to middle management, were males, and the average work experience was 4.5 years with a maximum of 16 years and a minimum work experience of 1 year.

A set of questions was asked to the middle managers and work persons to identify the problems they faced in communication. The questionnaire was designed in consultation with experts in the logistics field, so that it could refer to the exact problems keeping in mind questions identified by Patton (1990). Hence it comprises of experience questions, thinking/feeling questions and knowledge questions. For example “*Please share an experience/episode where miscommunication has led to problems*” indicates an experience question, “*What was your feeling?*” expresses a feeling question, and “*How do you manage such scenarios?*” indicates a knowledge question. Though most interviews were conducted face to face, certain interviews were telephonic in nature. Field notes were made. All the questions were descriptive in nature and no leads were given to interviewees to avoid bias.

The data were analyzed using content analysis. In addition, we also included analyzing nonverbal gestures, such as silence, shrugging, taking time to respond to our question, or the use of speech appendages like ummm.....and so on. Sundin and Fahy (2008) proposed similar perspectives in continuation to Denzin’s interpretive interactionism (Denzin, 1989). Following the Sandin and Fahy method (Sandin and Fahy, 2008), we also divided the responses as positive or negative and deconstructed the same.

Also, wherever required, we used frequencies and percentages through tables and pie charts respectively, for the purpose of presenting the perceptions with certain lucidity.

3. FINDINGS

Based on middle-management interviews pertaining to communication challenges and expectation management in Indian supply chain and logistics processes, the following generalizability was gained. The generalizability aids in presenting patterns of human experiences (how individuals working in the middle management of supply chain and logistics companies define, feel/think, and resolve issues) at middle-level management. For the purpose of convenience, an attempt has been made to derive meaning from various responses. Based on the main emerging theme from these responses, labels for side headings were identified:

3.1. Communication-Related Problems

One of the middle managers perceived that his/her heavy workload interfered with his/her ability to communicate. One of the comments was:

Sometimes I feel that I am unable to understand the exact need of the customer just because of short conversation or having time constraints due to more handling number of clients in a day. So high-workload causes problems.

The perception of being overloaded affects their ability to deal with clients. Some middle managers also depicted the effects of such a problem:

There was a consignment, which was to be sent on urgent basis, I was so frustrated that I asked the driver very annoyingly, which ultimately results in late delivery.

When I was communicating with my marketing department regarding number of pieces to be sent in a particular market and expiry date of products with production people, a simple mistake of dates led to loss of lakh of rupees to the company.

While the words “*asked the driver annoyingly*” very clearly depicts employee frustration, “*simple mistake of dates led to loss of lakh of rupees*” presents the mistakes and the cost the organisation had to pay for it.

Communication problems are ubiquitous. Not even a single participant denied its importance in the supply chain. Whether the participant was from the marketing department, or involved in technical job, almost all of them shared certain work experiences where they felt challenged

due to problems caused by miscommunication. In fact, the interesting find was the blame game, wherein some respondents from the logistics department clearly blamed the marketing department for making over commitments and over selling. The respondents ranged from those who incongruously portrayed their negative experiences, to others who did not consider self-responsibility and got into blame games. Certain find solace with technical (systemic) faults. These were the typical comments:

I would only talk of this that there lies a mismatch in the functioning of various departments.

Many times marketing department ends up in committing the superfluous terms and conditions to the clients. And at the end of the process the client needs the answer from the delivery department i.e. logistics about the commitment.

Once the Presales department promised to deliver the client order on particular date without consulting the logistics department, at that time we had to work hard to meet the deadlines so as to fulfil our client demands. It happened due to the lack of communication between the departments. Lack of communication between supply chain associations make the process challenging.

In the process of aligning supply chain and logistics activities to be more flexible and customer oriented, marketing demand in the pursuance of their functions ends up with over commitments to customers. The responsibilities and consequences of this have to be faced by the logistics department. The word “*superfluous terms and conditions*” explains this. It may be observed that over commitment by the marketing department, possibly affects the functioning of the logistics department. It may possibly be a short-cut *jugaad* made by the marketing department for attaining organisational goals. While the words “*mismatch*” clearly explains communication gaps, “*superfluous*” very clearly depicts that employees from logistics find it difficult to meet with the superfluous expectations of employees, hence leading to frustration.

On the other hand, one of the findings was:

Unavailability of proper communication from logistics department leads to not only delay in shipment but failure of policies and planning schedules of interconnected departments. Also logistics involves some rules and regulations which are very difficult to understand for the other departments thus there may be clashes between views.

It is not that the problems arise only from the marketing department. Each unit in supply chain processes does their best to attain their predetermined objectives. Marketing staff did complaint that lack of timely information from the logistics department leads to not only delay in shipments, but also adversely affects the planned schedules of interconnected departments.

The elaboration for this may be made from the following responses:

The miscommunication between marketing department and logistics lead to worst consequence. The information told by marketing department was not clear so it was incorrectly interpreted by Logistics department. They did exactly opposite.

Marketing department faces pressure to sell a service and may miss some information which the logistics department may point out later as rules and regulations, possibly leading to delay, excess pay or other hindrances which leads to feuds between customers and marketing departments or marketing and logistics department.

This clearly reflects *miscommunication* and *lack of information* among several units of the supply chain. Those involved in operations and logistics department narrated the following experiences:

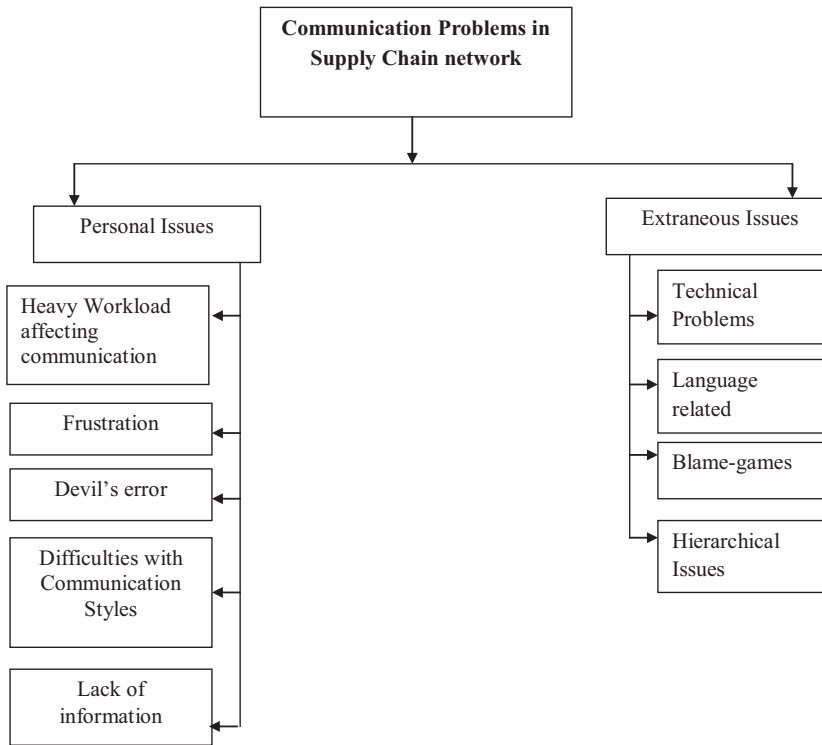
Sometime correct information about demand is not captured by the system and logistics department have to make many rounds to deliver the product at the destination.

We communicate ASN² electronically through the system; sometime we get issues with ASN transmission hence getting a huge charge back.

Through drivers we send Kanban cards which tells supplier what to load, how much to load, but sometimes the card will be lost in turn it will lead to miscommunication. We have to follow new technologies like SAP software, e-mails to communicate to the suppliers.

Sometimes delay happens due to server problems. Clients ask too many questions some time even we don't know what should be answered. And sometimes clients asked how much time a process will take we can't answer exact time to them because it depends on transportation condition. Clients do not understand the problems they just want us to be Super Man.

Figure 2: Communication Problems in Supply Chain network



Whatever may be the reason, miscommunication or the lack of communication among those involved in the network, can lead to problems such as backtracking, delayed delivery of consignment, failure to achieve commitment, and even financial losses.

There was a shipment fromxxxxxx, Dehradun being transferred to Vadodara and due to communication gap, we weren't intimated on time about the problems it faced during transit, and thus the shipment took 20 days to reach instead of the usual 5.

For instance we deal in coal unloading in power plants. So for proper unloading we have to deal with various departments like coal commercial, railway logistics and our own labour supervisor for proper unloading. Many times for communication problem we have been fined (even to the tune of Rs. 10 lakhs in the form of demurrage) by Owner Company. Recently we had a consignment for unloading of imported coal but due to lack of proper communication within our railway logistics wing, we couldn't unload as per desired time.

One respondent did explain hierarchical issues affecting communication adversely.

Once I need to find out what promises made by Sales to the customer, so I need to ask from the sales head. But since in our place only HOD's can ask such issues I had to wait for my HOD and so the consignment got delayed.

Other than the above responses, a few respondents also put forward their view regarding language as a barrier in their routine work. These were the typical observations:

One of my contractors delivered the order at different site location due to local language communication gap.

Sometimes our delivery boy faces a problem while dealing with the peoples who don't know Hindi, especially in Bandra, Churchgate, and some new localities of Mumbai.

We tried comprehending all these issues in Fig. 2.

Table 1: Workplace Conflicts that middle managers faced in supply chain processes

<i>SN</i>	<i>Responses</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
1.	No responses	09
2.	No Challenges	01
3.	Convincing Superiors	01
4.	Convincing coworkers	07
5.	Convincing customers on account of delays, communication gaps	07
6.	Dealing with many customers at one time in several situations	03
7.	Lack of sensibility among receivers	01
8.	Convincing almost all (superiors, co-workers, customers)	09
9.	Managing communication gaps	05
10.	Managing problems in the systems	04
11.	Managing Interdepartmental conflicts	09
12.	Retaining Clients	07
13.	Dealing with Competition	02
14.	Managing delays	04
15.	Adapting different communication styles with different people	02

3.2. Challenges in Human Communication

Making it clear that communication plays a vital role in supply chain processes, the question was put to respondents as to whether they face certain challenges due to communication-related problems. If yes, what are their challenges? Table 1 presents the summary of finds in this regard. Due to multiple responses from respondents, the frequency does not tally with sample size.

While no responses were obtained from 9 respondents and 1 replied, "no challenges", the multiple responses from the remaining narrated the whole story. Some managed their vulnerabilities on their own while others expressed it with feelings. Some were thinking (as we could make out through delayed response or errs and ummmms.... speech appendages) while, some were serious in their expressions. In the process of ascertaining challenges (in various verbal cognates), the derived keywords included:

- ◆ "convincing" indicative of the fact that convincing customers, clients, superiors, co-workers were the major challenges in this context
- ◆ "dealing" suggestive of dealing with competition, managing interdepartmental conflicts (as some others lack sensibilities and empathy),
- ◆ "managing" indicative of managing communication gaps, delays and thereby
- ◆ "retaining" suggesting that retaining clients were the major challenges faced.

Some of the responses were:

Convincing both parties to make partial compromises instead of one party making all the compromise, is a big challenge as either party tends to think that the other is at fault. Effective communication is the only way out along with a definite strategy.

We have to convince users/client with proof why the issue happening like above case of ASN transmission delay.

The major challenge is to track the current location of people i.e. dealing with people.

Problems are generally encountered in retaining clients because of the competition in the market if we are not able to suffice the needs of the client he is likely to switch.

Maintaining customers' trust is the primary challenge. Communication gap within the organisation too adds to the challenge.

It was further examined as to what respondents found most difficult—*dealing with people* or *dealing with processes*?

The majority of the respondents expressed the response "*dealing with people*", while very few respondents did consider the process to be challenging. Certain respondents could not decide between the two and came up with dualistic responses of both being challenging.

Table 2: Mostly used keywords by the respondents to evaluate people and process related challenges

<i>People</i>	<i>Process</i>
Subjective	Outdated
Non empathetic	Obsolete
Large	Having loopholes
Easygoing	Traffic problems
Lacking knowledge	Infrastructural issues
Non convincing	Unclear information
Having different mindsets	
Non understanding	
Some do not follow processes.	

Respondents used several keywords to explain people and processes. Table 2 presents those keywords by our respondents to evaluate people and process-related challenges. As few respondents did consider the process to be challenging their adverbs have also been reported:

This is how certain respondents portrayed their experience:

Dealing with people is a bigger problem. This is because people are subjective and effective communication can take place only by empathising each individual's position when one is interacting. This is a difficult task especially if the number of people is large.

Dealing with people. Rules and regulations are set by government which organisations have to follow. No one wants to deviate from it but somehow under client's pressure we may have to abide by it. That no one is interested in. Everyone has to save their job and has their own limits and no one wants to go out of their limits. Hence convincing them is a big problem

Dealing with people is a challenge because the output finally depends on the performance of people. It is so because the output finally depends on the performance of people in any designed process. Hence, management of people so as to make them work to their full potential at all times is a challenge.

Dealing with process is a bigger challenge as that are usually inflexible and sometimes outdated. Processes need to keep evolving with time. I found that the Company was dealing with different Clients which follow different processes and hence Service offerings has to be customized for each client which were slowing down by having cascading effect on other processes.

Sometime with people, sometime with process but mainly with people. Documents sometimes don't have clear information's about dispatch dates, party name, costs etc. And sometimes people don't understand the situation and blames all the things on the manager in case of any delay or some transaction problem.

3.3. The Great Expectations

In the pursuance of studying middle managers, it was significant to understand how they perceive what is expected of them, that is,

- ◆ expectations of seniors that may come from different departments,
- ◆ expectations of organisation (that is, expectations of people other than management, namely, subordinates, colleagues or sub-contractors or interdepartmental communication, or customers), and
- ◆ whether they face a dilemma because of differing organisational expectations and the expectations of management.

The responses to these expectations are presented in Table 3. Respondents perceived that their management expect them:

- ◆ to meet targets at the right time,
- ◆ sincerity,
- ◆ fulfilment of organisational objectives,
- ◆ satisfy customers, and
- ◆ give them the best experience through service delivery,
- ◆ get always things right and bring in revenues as much as possible,

Table 3: The Great Expectations

<i>Perceived Management Expectations</i>	<i>Perceived Expectations of other members of organisation- and its context</i>
Fulfillment of objectives, Meeting of targets on right time, On time, full quantity, right place and low cost	No additional responsibility expected by lower management other than just their routine work (Lower Level employees)
Sincerity	Act responsibly, work sincerely (Sub contractors)
Satisfy customers and give them the best experience through service delivery, Minimum problems from clients	Meeting of targets on right time, treat the job as of their own (Customers)
Get always things right and bring revenues as much as possible, Maximize returns on investment	If you grow better than others, it shouldn't be reflected in your behaviour (Subordinates/ Colleagues)
Retention of existing clients, addition of new clients	Solutions to the difficult problems and not to be with them harsh with them (Subordinates/ Colleagues, Customers, lower level employees)
Maintain good relationships with suppliers	Low costs and speedy services (Customers)
To get things align in the way that would bring profitable results	On time communication
Contribution towards organisational goals and sense of ownership, perfect in all departmental works	Cost effective services (customers)
On time communication, Quick and immediate actions	Cooperation, understanding their situation, clearly specifications
Beat last year performance and competitors	Flexibility in delivery (suppliers)
Dedication	

- ◆ minimum problems from clients,
- ◆ maximize return on investment,
- ◆ retention of existing clients,
- ◆ addition of new clients,
- ◆ maintain good relationships with suppliers,
- ◆ get things aligned in a way that would bring profitable results,
- ◆ contribution towards organisational goals and a sense of ownership,
- ◆ perfect in all departmental works, on time communication,
- ◆ beat last year's performance and competitors,
- ◆ dedication and quick and immediate actions they feel in certain expectations of customers,
- ◆ sub-contractors, subordinates and colleagues putting them in dilemma, for example, connotative and denotative differences in communication.
- ◆ Both the parties (management and clients) expect on time communication.

The other example that explains the situation is demand of services at a lower cost while management expects higher profits. For complying, the volume of business needs to be enhanced by increasing the workload. This

would mean more work pressure. One of the respondents already mentioned about the impact of overload on communication in the previous sections. Some other responses were:

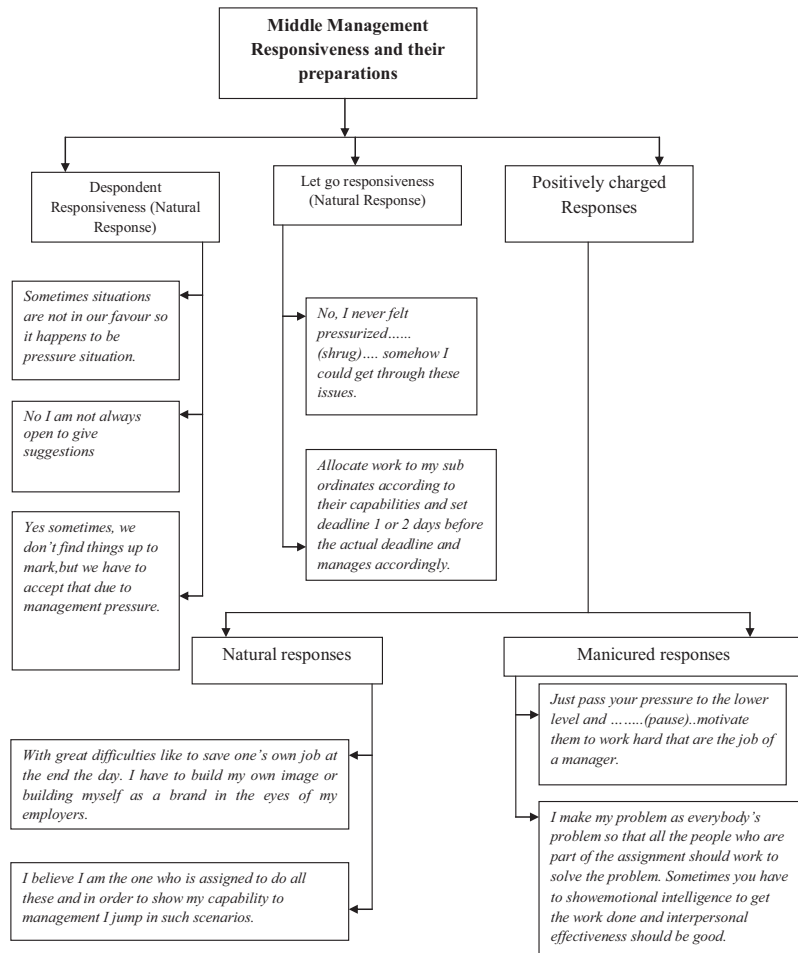
Yes this is a dilemma in itself because whether it is the organisation or the management, each party looks at his/her own gains. This results in a situation of no compromise leading to conflicts.

Yes definitely a dilemma..... (thinking)....ummm... but this is what my job requires me to do. I am set to face these challenges on regular basis.

3.4. Constraints and Middle Manager Responsiveness

Respondents illustrated a variety of responses when they were asked about whether they feel pressure, or do they feel that they work under constraints. If yes, how do they manage such scenarios? The idea was to understand the context in which middle managers ploy their responsiveness to communicate effectively. Though most middle managers agreed that they feel constrained in being responsive, it was found that their responses varied from being despondent to let go responses, as well as certain positively charged answers. Responsiveness in the given context is understood as something that pertains to effective corporate communication (Nick, 1999). For

Figure 3: Middle Management Responsiveness and their Preparations



the purpose of convenience, these responses are classified into three groups as presented in Fig.3. To support this classification, certain examples are also presented.

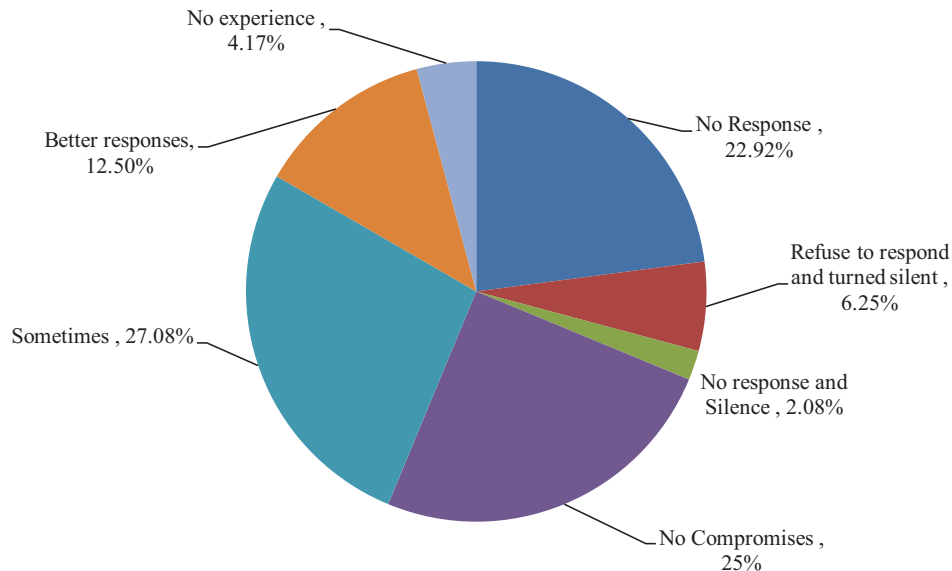
3.5. “Are You Here With the Solution or Are You a Part of the Problem?”

The above question clearly brings a reflection of Cleaver’s famous quote “If you’re not a part of the solution, you’re a part of the problem” (Chang, 2006).

The relation between superior managers and their subordinates are considered a microcosm of the organisational universe (Bisel, Messersmith, and Kelley, 2012). Bisel, Messersmith, and Kelley (2012) presented the understanding that most of the works on business communication presents a downward uni-dimensional view of supervisor-subordinate relationships and

suggested the need for a multidimensional study of business communication. The successful and meaningful relationships between subordinates and superiors require exploration of several opportunities (Schmieding, 1993) based on having realistic expectations from each other (Lloyd and Kathy, 1993). Lloyd and Kathy (1993) also opined that though constrained by organisational requirements, superiors may help subordinates by focusing on personal needs, such as training, counseling, exposure, and sponsorship. This presented a sense of reflection on having a view from respondents as to whether they are supported by their seniors in terms of finding solutions to their problems or work-related complexities.

The response mix comprises of several responses such as clear yes, clear no, yes often but not every time, always helpful, depends on authority dealing with, rarely as they want me to solve my own problem, help available only for newcomers, they themselves to be source of problems,

Figure 4: Compromising: Middle Managers Responses

call for meetings and try to understand each one's point of view, at least for me they are helpful, not much as it's my decision and I take them accordingly and depends on person to person.

Collectively, the following excerpts demonstrate a fused image of middle management responses:

They guide you, using their own experience.

They call for meetings and try to understand each one's point of view.

Sometimesnot always

For new comers yes but if are here for a long time than it's your job to handle things.

No, only personal relation with the lower subordinates work in the organisation and giving credits to them of their work to keep them happy and motivated.

Seniors have their own priorities and we have to solve our problems and when nothing can be done I will take the seniors help

Rarely. They want me to solve on my own...

Nothing can be generalized to have a specific reply to this question. Sometimes they are, many times they are not.

I personally feel, they are not always helpful because they only are reasons for creating problem.

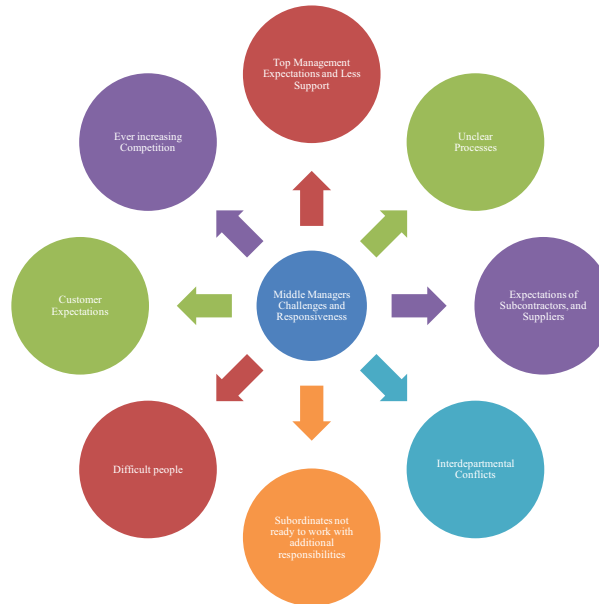
The expectation is mostly to resolve issues on our own. Don't let it trickle upwards.

3.6. It Works, but Does it Make Sense?

In the present study, we checked with middle managers as to whether they have to compromise to get their work done. The responses have been summated in figure 4. While 4.17% presented themselves with no experience in this regard, 22.92% gave no response, 6.25% refused to respond, 2.08% tuned themselves to silence (*we are assuming and analyzing that silence speaks a lot*), 25% gave clear responses of no compromises, 27.08% respondents responded with the response, sometimes and 12.50% had some better answers. Some responses are as follows:

I think I should not talk about such things to people outside the organisation. But I must tell you everybody does to survive in this cut throat competition.

No, no such a big issue if the contract is in favour of the company and could hamper the relationship the company has with the client then why not. The logistics department will make compromise.

Figure 5: Emerging Challenges for Middle Managers in Supply Chain Processes

Compromises become unavoidable at times so we have to compromise at times to push the output.

Depends upon the kind of relationship with the client.

No, actually it is not the case that logistics department is the only one that compromises. Every department has its own goals which are aligned with organisation's goal. If a client is big and has long term association and is beneficial for organisation, then compromises are fine. However if it is not a potential customer then logistics department even let the client view go. Same is the case, if marketing people tell about a new idea and if it's highly cost intensive from logistics point of view then we may let go of that suggestion.

Compromise is done only if it leads to benefit for the company as a whole but it may affect individual department's performance.

Many times logistics department is the only one to adjust situation because greater flexibility can be planned in logistics only.

As pleasing a customer is critical for any company to make business, it is better to ask logistics department to compromise rather than telling a customer to compromise.

Those who talked of compromising, also illustrated several factors such as client size, and future business prospects to be antecedent factors behind such compromises. The criteria for compromises can further be elaborated to the premise of business and managerial ethics. On further elaboration of queries in this context, few struggling respondents were observed (though they hardly expressed themselves overtly on these issues). Whereas most of them refrained from responding, or clearly denied unethical practices, few could manage to score those better responses that are presented below:

For that, there is a little flexibility in terms of min level of Service SLAs³ to be maintained. No unethical practice as it may spoil the work culture in long term.

If you are unethical in your professional life it is very difficult to survive. We focus on customer satisfaction. We can compromise with extra money to be spent to get the materials and arranging special vehicle like premium freight in order to avoid the production loss.

Sometimes we get chance and some unethical offers but I avoid get involve myself into it

Level of compromise should be such that the business interest could be in equilibrium with company's code

³ Service level agreement

of conduct and other practices. At times are tempted to get into some sort of unethical practices or out of the way to achieve a particular target, but as a rule we do not as it is very important to retain customer satisfaction and loyalty.

4. IMPLICATIONS

First, the study reveals the experiences of middle managers pertaining to communication or responsiveness problems in the supply chain and presents several experiential patterns in terms of dealing with communication and expectation challenges. Second, the study explores the availability of strategic managers' support to middle manager in pursuance of their responsiveness. Finally, the study focuses on organisational and managerial expectations of middle-level managers and how they cope up with the associated dilemmas in the typical Indian scenario, where amicability in relationship through high-context communication is given a lot of importance.

This study is not only helpful in expediting the experiences and challenges faced by middle managers to students willing to enter the profession of supply chain and logistics management, but also enables facilitators in understanding certain cases and presenting to their participants as case examples.

The study addresses the qualms of middle managers engaged in supply chain processes. Their job requires constant efforts to deal with clients, individuals involved in interdepartmental issues, suppliers, channel partners, and so on. This study also focuses on certain inputs, such as communication and dealing with managerial and organisational expectations, responsible for creating a healthy organisational climate. An attempt has been made to paraphrase all the emerging challenges in Fig.5.

With the increased competitiveness in the external environment, the internal pressure ultimately affects organisational processes. Dealing with difficult people, such as customers, clients, subordinates, superiors, and colleagues with differing expectations, may bring vulnerability in terms of middle-manager responsiveness. This paper presents themes of communication challenges, and dissonance between challenges at two levels, namely, challenges at the level of management and organisation. It also presents the difficulties in dealing with different types of people with whom one needs to deal, namely, subjective, non-empathetic, large, easygoing, lacking knowledge, non-convincing, having different mindsets, and non-understanding. It also deals with people not

following standard procedures as well as following outdated, obsolete processes that have loopholes. Given the competitive and hustled background, these middle managers in supply chain processes may or may not be supported by seniors, perhaps leading them to make compromises at work. This requires the preparation of middle-level managers to associate not only with other levels of management, but also with those members that exist in the external environment. These include not only people, but also the processes that bind these individuals within the internal and external business environment. Communication and managing expectations of organisations and management can help bring supply chain agility not only through the realms of people but also through processes.

In furtherance of this study, it may be associated that most individuals expand their understanding of self when they compare their experience with others (Festinger, 1954). This study attempts to provide the experiences of middle managers so that readers may compare self-experience with that of our respondents. This information, thus, may help them in self-evaluation, which might contribute in enhancing supply chain agility.

Further, the implications stand tall not only for organisations and middle managers but also for academicians and facilitators in understanding middle-manager challenges and presenting them to their students to feel, think, and make something out of it. This study brings to them several cases to enable them to learn decision making, or overcome their indecisiveness hustles, emotion management, and balancing the people and processes at the workplace. This study also presents the levels to which they should be prepared to make compromises.

5. CONCLUSION

- ◆ **Grit:** The study determines a generalizability of human experiences (feel/think, define and resolve) at middle-level management, pertaining to communication challenges and expectation management in Indian supply chain processes. The study suggests negative communication experiences generate negative feelings and negative thoughts and that adversely affects performance at work (brings irritation, frustration, and moreover losses to business). This is indicative of adverse impact of situations on performances of middle managers at personal and professional levels and agility of supply chain processes.

The findings gel with the proposition of Gligor and Holcomb that explains the impact of behavioural interventions like communication (responsiveness) in Indian supply chain and logistic processes. Support from seniors is indeed needed. Adversities and discrepancies in organisational processes make middle managers to compromise on several stances.

- ◆ **Unique Contribution:** The study contributes The study contributes uniquely not only inexpression of feeling/thinking of Indian middle managers engaged in supply chain and logistics processes, but also offers their responsiveness. In addition, this study may enable Indian middle managers, organisations and academicians in expanding their realizations to meaning of such feelings in their respective field. This in turn may possibly be capitalized in creating work climate that takes care of supply-chain constraints and enhancement of supply chain agility and managerial performances.

The implications stand tall not only for organisations and middle managers but also for academicians and facilitators in understanding middle manager challenges and presenting them to their students as food for thought.

6. LIMITATIONS

Though none of the research is complete and has certain limitations, this study is limited by the fact that the purposive sample was drawn on the basis of convenience. More validity, reliability, and precision may be required in translating qualitative data from the trenches of Indian supply chain processes using empirical studies. In the present study, the responses were obtained from a wide range of managers and effectiveness evaluation was done in isolation (totality but on case basis) and not in groups.

Despite these limitations, our study presented communication challenges and the management of expectations in an environment characterized by high-context communication. This may help strategic managers operating in Indian firms to have certain inputs from the trenches that, in turn, may help them in enhancing supply chain agility.

Also, as the term “responsiveness” has been placed well in the literature of communication (Claus, 2003), and pertains to one effective corporate communication (Nick, 1999), in the present study, the terms “communication” and “responsiveness” have often been used interchangeably.

7. FUTURE RESEARCH

Future studies may be planned with data collection using group processes. The data may possibly be collected from the members sitting face-to-face in a T-group style. To aid better findings, cross sectional data may be obtained from sampling units coming from different departments and levels of hierarchy of a homogenous universe. Idiosyncratic studies, I expect may bring better results.

Success of such future research possibly would depend on trust among sampling unit, hence trust building exercises and researches must be considered as an antecedent to build right platform for determining cross sectional patterns of communication responsiveness (inclusive of feeling and thinking).

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