CHAMPIONING YOUR INNOVATION WITH A CAPTIVATING VISION. A GOOD IDEA?

exploring the effect of middle-managers' upward vision communication in their championing activities

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ABSTRACT

Middle-managers execute their work between operational activities and strategic decision-making. Therefore, they have a unique position to identify and promote innovations. Literature hints towards vision communication to successfully pitch and convince people of an innovation. However, vision communication theory is only studied from the stance of leaders. With my study I test a lens reversal exploring the effect of upward vision communication on innovation decision-making by top management. To do so I introduce the mediating effect of leadership threat and the moderating effect of managerial openness. To test the hypotheses, I distributed a survey to top managers at a large Dutch insurance company. Half of the respondents received a survey with an innovative pitch by a middle manager enriched with vision communication, the other half only received a promotional pitch. Survey results do not enable me to report significant interaction between variables. However, I found a direct significant negative effect of managerial openness on leadership threat and marginal negative interaction between top managers having less experience in position (< 5 years) and lower experience of leadership threat.

ABSTRACT (NL)

Midden-managers opereren tussen de werkvloer en de strategische koersbepalers. Mede daarom verkeren zij in de unieke positie om innovaties te ontdekken en te promoten. De literatuur spreekt over het communiceren van een visie om een innovatie succesvol te pitchen om zodoende anderen te overtuigen. Echter, visie communicatie is enkel onderzocht vanuit het perspectief van leiders. Met mijn studie draai ik het perspectief om, waarin ik het effect onderzoek van opwaartse visie communicatie op de innovatie besluitvorming van top management. Dit doe ik middels de introductie van een moderator: *managerial openness* en een mediator: *leadership threat*. Om mijn hypotheses te testen heb ik een survey uitgezet waarin de helft van de respondenten een vignette te lezen kreeg met een visie en de andere helft zonder. De onderzoeksresultaten stellen mij niet in staat direct significante interacties tussen variabelen te ontdekken. Desalniettemin vond ik een direct negatief effect van managerial openness op leadership threat en een marginaal negatieve interactie tussen top managers met minder ervaring in positie (< 5 jaar) en de mindere mate waarop zij leadership threat ervaarde.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I was 14, football and friends were way more important to me than study. Something that people – especially teachers and my parents - could easily consent by only observing my grades. Still, I remember the support and encouragement of my parents in the path I followed. I also remember that I quoted something like: "I will make it. Even with a detour".

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PREFACE

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INTRODUCTION

Innovation is a key determinant of organizational productivity, competition and survival and is often driven by a champion (i.e., someone who makes contribution to an innovation by promoting its subject and progress)(Howell & Higgins, 1990). Middle-managers are 'the best men' to exploit championing activities as they are positioned at the heart of organizations and are, in contrary with top managers, not isolated from day-to-day activities (Hornsby et al, 2002). From that position, they have a crucial role in the competitive position of companies and their strategic performance, as they often identify and promote innovations which are important for long-term survival (Dutton et al, 1997). Championing requires middle-managers to convince top managers to give financial support and allocate resources on the innovation raised. Therefore, communication is key. To get a decision on their activity, middle-managers have to influence decision-makers, thus communication in upward direction is required. Literature states that champions especially need a vision to influence subordinates, peers and leaders (Howell & Higgins, 1990).

Literature mentions several positive outcomes on the presence and communication of a vision. Top managers can inspire workers with communicated vision. Visions can move the collective towards a shared goal (Berson et al, 2015). Furthermore, entrepreneurship theorists also point out the relationship between vision communication and venture growth (Baum et al, 1998). However, this is all researched from the perspective of a leader-follower relationship, which is inherently hierarchal and top-down in nature.

At the same time, champion literature prescribes vision communication to be effective as well (Howell & Higgins, 1990). However, the situation of a championing middle-manager

is different then a vision communicating top manager (i.e. bottom-up direction, different hierarchal position). The question remains whether the theory of vision communication also applies to the situation of a champion.

Over time a rich body of knowledge on vision communication is built from a leader's perspective. Yet, the literature on vision communication in upward direction falls short. The effect of upward vision communication is unknown while it is of concern to create better understanding as it is a central championing activity for influencing decision-making. One of the reasons the theory falls short is because of its traditional leader-follower perspective. Second, leaders might experience vision communication as a threat that conflicts with hierarchy. Middle-managers challenging the status quo implicitly challenge the functioning of the leader. The degree to which subordinates express such leadership activity depends on managerial openness. Perhaps, middle-managers do not dare to communicate visions as they are afraid of the outcome and therefore not much is known about the activity in general.

Here a paradox comes in as upward vision communication might be experienced as a confronting technique on the one hand, but it is a necessary championing activity to influence leaders' innovation adoption-decisions on the other. This theoretical shortcoming is of interest because "*a rich body of literature suggests that perhaps the most effective process for creating innovative ventures is through originating, developing, and promoting them from the bottom up*" (Day, 1994, p.149). Therefore, it is important to create a better understanding of the effect of upward vision communication, elaborating on what is known already about championing and top managers decision-making. This study questions whether the effect of top-down vision communication also holds for the situation of a championing middle-manager and explores the

upward effect towards top managers decision-making on innovation. This postulates the following research question (RQ):

RQ: What is the effect of middle-managers' upward vision communication on top managers innovation adoption decisions?

I examine the effect of upward vision communication on top managers innovation adoption. First, I argue that vision communication will have a negative effect on leadership threat, since top managers will feel that middle-managers are entering their leadership domain as they try to effectively challenge the status quo they represent (Sijbom et al, 2015). Resulting in my first hypothesis: upward vision communication will have a positive effect on leadership threat.

Second, managers open to suggestions raised will encourage and positively respond to upward behavior (Rohrbaugh, 2002). From a theoretical perspective, managerial openness contains flexible behavior towards change and innovation and therefore I argue that this managerial characteristic will positively influence the relationship between vision communication and leadership threat, resulting in hypothesis two: managerial openness will negatively influence the relation between upward vision communication and leadership threat.

Finally, top managers who feel threatened by their subordinate will not be able to evaluate an innovation the right way. I thus expect a negative mediating effect of leadership threat on the innovation decision of the top manager, followed by the final hypothesis: upward vision communication mediated by leadership threat will have a negative effect on the innovation adoption decision

To test my research question, I conducted a survey with 50 respondents who represent the senior management of a corporate insurance company in The Netherlands. Respondents are

covering multiple offices and business units in different countries. The respondents received a survey which was introduced by a middle-manager who entered the room of the top manager. He started a pitch to get a positive decision on the innovation raised. After reading the pitch the respondents had to fill out questions regarding upward vision communication (IV), leadership threat (mediator), managerial openness (moderator) and the innovation adoption decision (DV). In sum, the results and interaction between variables were small and not significant, therefore the hypotheses are not supported. Nevertheless, the results do show a direct negative effect of managerial openness on leadership threat. Marginal (not significant) evidence comes up for managers with 1-5 years of experience in current position showing less leadership threat than people with 6 or more years of experience.

The central contribution of this study is that I challenged the existing theory by discovering the effect of vision communication in upward direction on innovation adoption. Furthermore, I provide first steps of clarification for one characteristic with a direct negative effect on leadership threat: managerial openness. Open managers do not feel threatened by their subordinates, therefore I suggest managerial characteristics play a crucial role in hindering or rewarding bottom-up activities. Second, to get better understanding of leadership threat it should be studied together with organizational culture and with a hybrid survey model. Third, I provide a theoretical suggestion to track down the consistency between organizational culture, managerial openness and the degree of bottom-up and/or championing behavior of middle-managers.

This studies' management contribution is twofold: middle-managers receive a suggestion to not worry about upward vision communication as part of their championing

activities. Top managers receive a suggestion to create awareness on the relationship between their openness and the actual bottom-up attempts raised by middle-managers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Championing Middle-Managers

Research underpins the strategic position of middle-managers (Huy, 2001), capturing their activities in four roles. One of them is described as "championing strategic alternatives", explaining the unique qualifications of middle-managers as they are living between strategy and operations (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997). From that role, they take their part in the innovation adoption-decisions of top managers. They use upward influence processes to communicate strategic issues and provide important contributions to an organization's strategic agenda (Dutton et al, 1997). This statement is supported by the definition of a champion: *"an individual who informally emerges in an organization and makes a decisive contribution to the innovation by actively and enthusiastically promoting its progress through the critical organizational stages"* (Howell & Higgins, 1990, p. 644). A major part of their activities is the promotion of their innovations with a twofold purpose: overcoming resistance and gathering support (Maidique, 1980). They need to persuade not only peers and subordinates (Huy, 2001), but more importantly, top managers have to support their innovation project as well (Roure, 2001). Championing and leadership literatures suggest that these middle managers need to express a captivating vision in order to convince the people around them (Howell et al, 2005; Howell & Higgins, 1990). Yet, literature falls short in explaining how visions may help or hinder middle managers in championing their innovations to top managers.

Conventionally, leadership literature dictates that with visions leaders can motivate followers by communicating images of the future of the collective (Stam et al, 2014). Visions help leaders and followers to align to organizational decision making (Kohles et al, 2012) and

provide a positive sense of collective identity (Shamir et al, 2018). Perhaps the most important indicator of vision communication effectiveness is vision pursuit. Vision communication results in vision pursuit through *"the development of (shared) collective possible selves through vision elaboration and a focus on collective self-conception"* (p. 35). Yet, prior research on visions is built from the stance of leaders- an inherently top-down situation, with communication often being conveyed from position of hierarchy.

The question remains whether these theories also apply toward upwards vision communication. The vision communication of middle managers to top managers is coined upward vision communication and is characterized by a reversal of the traditional hierarchical position of the individual communicating the vision. Former studies support that leadership behavior (e.g. vision communication) is not only exerted by top managers, but also by middle-managers (Floyd & Woolridge; 1997; Yang et al, 2010). However, this does not mean that effects of top-down vision communication holds for champions in their bottom-up vision communication as well.

From this point of view, vision communication does not endeavor followers to move, but top managers. Yet, the purpose of communication partly remains the same. Championing middle-managers use vision communication to influence the decision-making on their innovations raised to finally get support on their initiatives. Theoretical arguments can be made to discuss why effects of top-down vision communication not automatically apply to bottom-up. Effects measured in previous research are focusing on top-down communication. The attributes of such visions hold characteristics of top-managers activities (Kantabutra, 2010). Meaning, relationships between organizational roles and distribution of authority are

intertwined with exerting influence (Yukl & Falbe, 1990). A middle-manager lower in hierarchy is able to communicate a vision, yet the effect is unclear. Traditionally, followers are used to be mobilized by leaders (Stam et al, 2010) and therefore it might be experienced as surprising if a peer or middle-manager exerts vision communication behavior. In theory and practice, top managers hypothesize vision communication as part of their job and behavior (Yukl, 1998). Because of that it is hard to argue that they will automatically move, respond or change their strategic direction as a result of upward vision communication.

This argument is supported by research (Bruch & Walter, 2007) that investigates the hierarchical impacts on specific transformational leadership behaviors, such as inspirational motivation and visioning. This study argues that these behaviors are more prevalent and successful amongst upper rather than middle-managers. A second argument is that positive impact of top-down vision communication is more likely than the impact of visioning on top manager selves. Both hypothesis were significantly supported.

In sum, championing literature underpins the added value and necessity of a vision. In contrast, Bruch & Walter (2007) provide empirical evidence of less effect of vision communication in upward direction. These findings are contradicting and therefore the effect of upward vision communication (in comparison with existing vision theories) remains unclear.

I raise two arguments why it is crucial to explore the upward effect: (1) the creation and communication of innovative visions is prescribed as a pivotal activity in championing something new (Howell & Higgins, 1990). Therefore, it is of interest to gather knowledge on the upward effect to enrich the existing vision communication theory and support or refute the arguments of former studies who claim the necessity of vision communication as champion.

(2) Middle-managers play a strategic role in organizations and therefore it is of theoretical and practical relevance to gain better understanding of the effect of their activities. The hypotheses section elaborates on the arguments raised.

Top Managers Decision Making

The decision to accept or reject an innovation is in hands of top management (Rogers, 2010). This stage is seen as the middle part of innovation adoption, surrounded by initiation (first stage) and implementation (last stage). Literature defines the adoption decision as following: [The] "*adoption decision reflects evaluating the proposed ideas from technical, financial and strategic perspectives, making the decision to accept an idea as the desired solution, and allocating resources for its acquisition, alteration, and assimilation",* (Damanpour & Schneider, 2006, p. 217). It is this critical stage of the adoption process that middle-managers want to influence and therefore chosen as topic of study, ignoring initiation and implementation.

This needs some clarification. Literature ascribes the stage of initiation to top managers where they get informed on innovations (outside in) or where they explore undiscovered fields of improvement themselves (inside out). These are activities that pertain the recognition of a need (Damanpour & Schneider, 2006). However, from this studies' point of view, these activities are executed by the champion (middle-manager). With respect to implementation, this is a crucial facet in innovation adoption, but that is a step ahead of what the middle-manager basically wants to influence because that is the adoption decision.

Next to innovation stages, literature pays attention to determinants influencing decision-making. This studies' focus is on the determinant 'top manager'. Previous research did study on several actors impacting their decision-making, i.e. complexity and costs of the innovation, innovation impact, knowledge of the market, availability IT capacity and the presence of a champion (Damanpour & Schneider, 2008; Kamal, 2006). Championing in

general tends to have a positive impact on managerial decision-making. With this study, I highlight a single championing activity (upward vision communication) of which I argue that – in contrary with former outcomes – it will negatively affect top managers decision-making.

This study contributes to existing literature in adding knowledge on the innovation *stage* of decision-making by the *determinant* of top management, focusing on upward communication influencing this determinant. The hypotheses section will raise arguments on how decision-making is influenced by upward vision communication.

HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Upward vision communication and leadership threat

I argue that middle-managers' engagement in vision communication will trigger leadership threat. Top managers have gone a long way to reach the top. Their position is a result of hard work, suffering and asks for vigor and leadership. This requires leadership behavior. In literature, the formulation and communication of a vision is prescribed to charismatic people who are able to persuade followers, gaining and maintaining power through their influence (Sosik & Dinger, 2007). Therefore, vision communication manifests itself in a top managers identity and is automatically prescribed – in both theory and practice – to leaders. As a part of that, top managers might feel that it is their prerogative to engage in such activities. When a middle-manager lower in the hierarchal line expresses such behavior I argue that it may trigger the following:

First, top managers are power holders and responsible for the status quo. A complication of set-breaking innovative vision communication by a middle-managers is that, from a top manager point of view, it might give the experience and feeling of incompetent leadership (Sijbom et al, 2015). Such perceptions might result in negative emotions and may incite defensive behavior towards the champion, as the attempt to challenge the status quo is not appreciated (Burris, 2012).

Second, the top managers perception might be that middle-managers are overstepping their domain by questioning the strategic direction. From the top managers point of view this might results in aversion against the vision communication of the middle-manager. As a result of that he might devaluate the innovation raised (Fast et al, 2014). These managerial

perceptions are a result of hierarchal thinking. This means that the hierarchal position is a power base an individual possesses as result of a position or role. And each position has its own responsibilities, possibilities and (hierarchal) limitations. This means that the top manager is putting work behavior in a framework (i.e. operational activities in lower layers, strategic activities in high layers).

H1: Upward vision communication will have a positive effect on leadership threat

Managerial openness and leadership threat

The degree to which top managers feel threatened depends on their managerial openness, which is a personal characteristic as underlying trait of flexibility (McCartt & Rohrbaugh, 1995). Managerial openness is explained twofold: from a managerial perspective it contains flexible behavior towards change and innovation. From a subordinate's perspective it refers to *"subordinates' perceptions that their boss listens to them, is interested in their ideas, gives fair consideration to the ideas presented, and at least sometimes takes action to address the matter raised"* (Detert & Burris, 2007, p. 871).

I consider managerial openness to be both a characteristic and skill, which means that managers individually will score differently on this trait. The previous hypothesis shows defensive managerial behavior on upward vision communication, even when the problem raised may be a valid one. Managerial openness is the ability to get over the personal threat, supporting the upward behavior of people lower in hierarchy in the first place and secondly it enables top managers to judge the items on the basis of content, as a result of their curiosity towards innovation (Rohrbaugh, 2002).

From this studies' point of view, upward vision communication of middle-managers raises attention for the need of innovation to secure the future position of the organization. This might trigger several personal feelings of threat and behaviors at the top managers address responding negatively on the upward vision communication.

I address the following arguments why managerial openness positively changes the relationship between vision communication and leadership threat. First, leadership threat is an emotion as a result of an activity in the first place. Managers who are open to suggestion have the capacity *"to be cognitively and behaviorally flexible"* (Rohrbaugh, 2002, p. 153) in such situations. This means their behavior on upward activities is open in the first place which will rise above their eventual feeling of threat. Second, *"the openness factor is connected to intellectual curiosity, creativity, and divergent thinking that tend to be encouraging of efforts toward organizational innovation"* (p. 154). This study focuses on the championing behavior of a middle-manager to successfully pitch an innovation. Managerial openness is positively linked with efforts of organizational innovation. I argue that their curiosity towards innovation in general will give a feeling of individual and organizational exploration in the first place above the feeling of threat, resulting in the following expected result (figure 1) and hypothesis.

H2: Managerial openness will negatively influence the relation between upward vision communication and leadership threat.

Figure 1: expected result of moderation by managerial openness
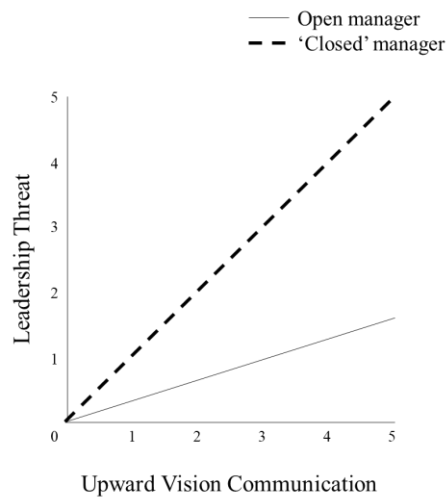
Leadership threat and innovation adoption

I argue leadership threat to have a negative effect on the adoption-decision (to accept or reject an innovation as the desired solution) of top managers. Vision communication and strategic decision-making are ascribed to top management as these decisions shape the course of the organization (Papadakis et al, 1998; Amason, 1996). Literature on the factors of top managers influencing these decisions show two determinants: demographics and attitudes. Normally, top managers attitudes towards a decision are shaped in boardrooms (Damanpour & Schneider, 2006). As such, decision-making is both an act and favor that belongs to top management. Nevertheless, for several individual and organizational reasons, actors are trying to influence the decision-making. From this studies' perspective, this attempt of influence is an upward activity from middle-managers because they are convinced that their vision and innovation are key in long-term survival and therefore top management support and involvement is much needed to succeed (Roure, 2001).

The first hypothesis emphasizes the positive effect of upward vision communication on leadership threat (feelings of incompetent leadership, leaders train of thought on functioning and their authority being questioned). In line with that feeling, this leads the top manager "*to actively oppose any further development of* [the] *ideas*" (Sijbom et al, 2015, p. 281). This leadership threat is conceptualized by measuring the degree of feeling questioned on his status, position, feeling and hierarchal thinking.

The arguments that describe leadership threat are hypothetic only in the first place. It is a feeling, not a fact. However, if the threatened top manager decides to accept the innovation of the champion he is personally responsible for the confirmation of his own feelings. This might lead to fictional what if scenario's. What if they question my position now? What if this is a prove of disfunctioning? I argue that top managers do not want to happen such situations at all and therefore I postulate the following and final hypothesis.

H3a: Leadership threat will have a negative effect on the innovation adoption decision

H3b: Upward vision communication mediated by leadership threat will have a negative effect on the innovation adoption decision

Figure 2: theoretical framework

| Upward Vision Communication | Managerial Openness | | Innovation Adoption Decision |

H2: -

H1: +   Leadership Threat   H3a: -

H3b (mediation via Leadership Threat): -
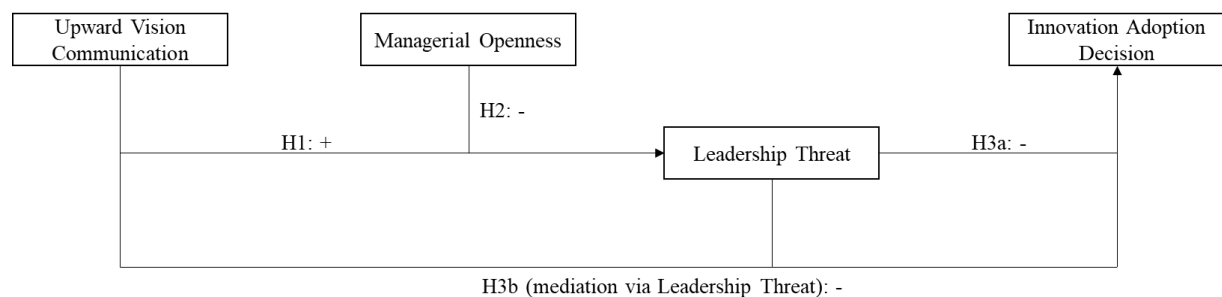
METHODS

A survey was developed and conducted to test the research question and hypotheses. The survey was distributed randomly and included a manipulation. After reading the introduction respondents had to read the manipulation followed by questions on the variables ended by questions about control variables.

Unit of analysis and sample

Senior- and top managers of a corporate insurance company headed in The Netherlands were targeted as unit of analysis. The senior management layer of this organizations consists of approximately 150 people globally. The respondents are responsible for a department (IT, Client Servicing, Legal and Marketing & Sales) or business unit (Life and Non-Life insurance, Banking and Investment) covering multiple countries.

To achieve a high response rate, I executed a snowball process. Starting with my own senior manager conducting the survey in her own Management Team, picked up by her manager (CEO), conducting the survey in his Management Team and so on. This process ends at the top of hierarchy and because of that this process is repeated over several business units. In addition, I sent two introduction e-mails to tease them already on what was coming. Top managers' agendas are fully booked and therefore I had to make them enthusiastic beforehand, resulting in 50 people filling out my survey, which is in line with earlier findings on top managers response rate (Cycyota and Harrison, 2006).

Participants

In total, 50 top- and senior managers filled out the online survey. After cleaning data, 49 respondents remained. Initially, 14 respondents were women, 36 were men (Table 1).

Table 1: gender divide respondents
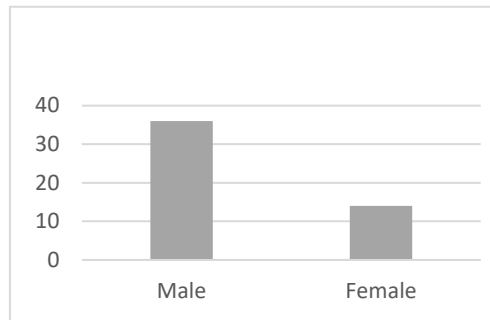
Most respondents were aged between 41 and 50. 2 respondents hold a bachelor's degree, 7 respondents hold a doctorate's degree and the remainder (41) hold a master's degree (Table 2). All respondents were employed, being categorized as senior manager (28), CEO (4) CCO, CIO, CFO (10) or other (8) (Table 3).

Table 2: degree divide respondents

Table 3: position divide respondents
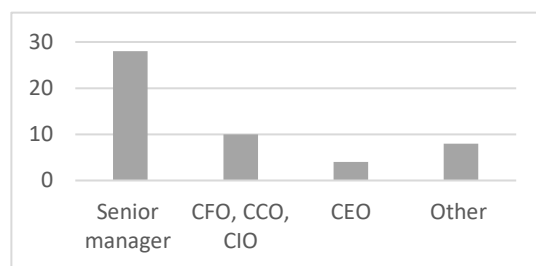
Design

I designed a between-subjects experiment with two conditions (presence and absence of vision communication). Respondents were allocated randomly to one of the conditions. The vision condition introduced the survey with a vignette in which the upward vision communication of
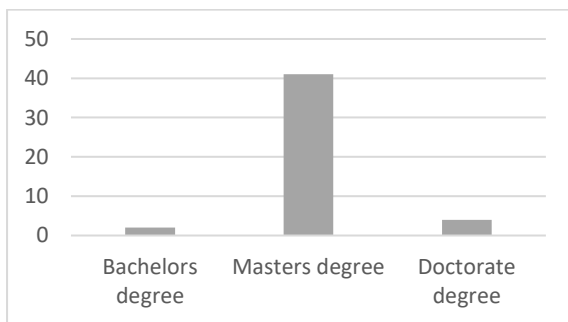
a middle-manager was incorporated in his pitch, which was centered around a the introduction of a new organizational innovation. The vision was formulated persuasively and the desired outcome was focused on a positive innovation adoption decision to ensure long-term survival end competitiveness. Vision communication held three criteria (or *attributes*) to distinguish it from non-vision communication: ultimate goal, moving the collective and the translation to lower level goals. The control condition introduced a vignette that was not related to vision communication to develop a manipulation. This way of communication was derived from the promotional activities of a champion, with vision communication being absent. After introducing the vignette, the respondents had to answer questions on the variables of this study which are introduced extensively after the procedure section.

Procedure

The survey was distributed digitally via Qualtrics. Former research shows that executives' response rate is close to 32% (Cycyota and Harrison, 2006) and therefore I introduced my survey on time. After manipulation checks, the second section was initiated to test the effect of vision communication on leadership threat, introducing several items to measure the effect of the middle-managers activity on their degree of leadership threat. Third, to measure the effect of managerial openness on leadership threat, questions were raised on the openness of managers on suggestions raised by employees lower in hierarchy. Finally, that is what the middle-manager finally aims for, items were raised to test the effect of their upward activities on the innovation adoption decision of top managers. Anonymity was guaranteed and the estimated time to fill out was set up to ten minutes.

Dependent Variable – *innovation adoption decision*

Literature on innovation adoption agrees on three stages: initiation, adoption decision and implementation (Pichlak, 2016; Hameed et al, 2012; Damanpour & Schneider, 2006). With respect to the adoption decision two activities are fulfilled: a strategic evaluation of the innovation and the final allocation of resources. These activities are seen and studied as separate items and therefore I included multiple items to cover the full range of activities. Questions were partially adapted (Damanpour & Schneider, 2006), as the former study raised questions from the perspective of local government managers giving support on New Public Management programs. I adapted the perspective to top managers in a corporate insurance company (Appendix I). Items were measured with a 5-point scale (1: strongly disagree – 5: strongly agree): "As manager I consider to seriously evaluate the proposed innovation from technical, financial and strategic perspectives", "As manager I am willing to support by funding the innovation" (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.786). Then, a direct decision question was raised: "I am willing to support the innovation raised" (yes/no). Finally, respondents had the opportunity to allocate budget (0-150k) and fte (0-5) based on the statement: "Given the innovation raised by the middle-manager I am willing to support…". The Linear Models (4-9) in the result section only represent the direct 'yes/no' decision question. The other questions are also tested and reported in the robustness check.

Independent Variable – *vision communication*

To operationalize the independent variable (vision communication) a dummy variable was created to measure the presence or absence of vision communication. Zero (0) meant the participant was not exposed to vision communication and one (1) represents the participants to be exposed to vision communication (Appendix II).

Manipulation check

Surveys were introduced with a vignette concluding with reliability checks on my manipulation (Appendix VI). The vignettes were pre-tested (quantitative and qualitative) with seven colleagues in the role of project manager, consultant and project lead. I asked them to imagine as if they were a top manager. The items were measured with a 5-point scale (1: strongly disagree – 5: strongly agree) using existing questions on vision communication (Podsakoff et al, 1990), adding vision characteristics of former research (Stam et al, 2014): The middle-manager… "paints a compelling vision of the future for our organization", "paints an abstract, long-term vision of the future", "inspires to move the collective towards an organizational goal" and "translates his strategic plan to operational activities". After executing linear regression, results show that there is no significant difference between how respondents experienced the vision from the non-vision vignette. One-way ANOVA did not show large differences between conditions ($F(1,51) = 0, 306$, $p = 0.583$) and there was a low mean difference between vision (mean 3.27) and innovation (mean 3.18).

Moderator – *managerial openness*

I have adapted three items from Ashford et al (1998). Top managers responded on a 5-point scale (1: strongly disagree – 5: strongly agree). The items were: "As manager I am open to suggestions", "As manager I give serious consideration to good ideas" and "As manager I give fair evaluation to good suggestions raised" (Appendix III). In addition, two questions were raised on former behavior: "Middle-manager in general often raise good innovations" and "I have supported bottom-up innovations before" (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.797).

Mediator – *leadership threat*

Leadership threat is a relatively new concept and therefore I have contacted researchers (Ethan Burris, University of Texas and Tanya Menon, Ohio State University) who studied 'threat' in relation to challenging the status quo in earlier studies. Their studies measured 'threat' from a subordinate point of view, but they suggested me to use the items from Lam (2013) which are measured with a five-item scale. (Appendix IV). Elaborating on their advice I adapted the items from Lam, but changing the perspective towards a top managers. Raising questions on "By raising his/her vision I might lose status in the organization", "By raising his/her vision for the organization my ability to succeed in my position will be questioned" , "By raising his/her vision the middle-manager overstepped his boundaries" and "By raising his/her vision the middle-managers indirectly questions my authority" measured on a 5-point scale (1: strongly disagree – 5: strongly agree) (Cronbach's Alpha 0.742).

Control Variables

I have used two sets of control variables: management and demographics (Appendix V). *Management* variables to measure type of study, position, tenure in management and tenure in top management position. Testing these variables might give different interaction between variables. For example, younger top manager might experience less leadership threat as they are more used to an organizational environment that encourages bottom-up behavior. Older top managers did experience traditional environments as well and might respond differently.

Demographics questions were raised on age, gender, education, country employed, business unit and department employed. Answers on these questions give insights on the degree of influence from country (e.g. cultural differences), department or business unit. For example,

the Change & IT department might be more willing to support innovation in general as technological innovations occur more often.

Data Analysis

First of all, I cleaned the data to work with a meaningful set of survey answers. Then, I ran one way ANOVA and multiple linear regressions to determine the relationship between variables visualized in several Models (Table 5 and 6). In addition, I have calculated the correlations between variables (Table 4) and the means and standard deviations of all variables (Table 7). To do my statistical analysis I used R[1], using the packages data.table, car, multilevel, mediation, corrplot, lmtest and openxlsx.

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[1] *R is a free software environment for statistical computing and graphics*

RESULTS

Model free analysis

Table 4 presents the correlation between variables. A closer look on the key variables (vision communication, managerial openness, leadership threat and innovation adoption) only shows a negative correlation between managerial openness and leadership threat (-0.55). Other correlations are very small and/or not significant. Furthermore, the variable top managers with working experience smaller than five years is positively associated with innovation adoption (0.24).

Hypothesis testing

The results of the linear regressions are reported in Table 5 and 6. Model 1-3 report the results with leadership threat as y-variable. Model 4-9 report the results with innovation adoption as y-variable. The built-up of the Model follows the following structure: Model 1 and 6 report the direct effect of the vision manipulation on respectively leadership threat and innovation adoption. Model 2 and 7 include the control variables age, position and experience in position. Model 3 and 8 include the moderating effect of managerial openness and Model 9 summarizes the Model including both the moderating effect of managerial openness and the mediating effect of leadership threat. In between, model 4 and 5 report the results of the effect of leadership threat on innovation adoption, corresponding with hypothesis 3a.

First, the effect of vision communication is tested toward leadership threat (Hypothesis 1). This hypothesis is not supported. After including the control variables, marginal (not significant) evidence comes up for managers with 1-5 years of experience in current position

showing less leadership threat (β = -0.33, $S.E.$ = 0.2, p = 0.09) than people with 6 or more years of experience.

Second, the effect of vision communication on leadership threat, moderated by managerial openness (hypothesis 2) is not supported either. There is no evidence of any interaction effect between variables. However, managerial openness shows a significant direct negative effect on leadership threat (β = –0.57, $S.E.$ = 0.16, p = 0.001). This finding hints towards the important relation between championing activities and decision-making.

Thirdly, the effect of hypothesis three (*a* and *b*) was tested: first, the direct effect of leadership threat on innovation adoption (β = 0.60, $S.E.$ = 0.70, p = 0.39). After that the control variables were included (β = 0.89, $S.E.$ = 0.72, p = 0.22). Then the effect of vision communication toward innovation adoption, mediated by leadership threat and moderated by managerial openness. None of the Models (4-9) show interaction between variables and therefore hypothesis 3a and 3b are rejected. Thus, based on the results I cannot report significant outcomes on the research question postulated.

In addition I ran a mediation analysis to explain the effect of vision communication on innovation adoption, mediated by leadership threat. In line with the aforementioned results, leadership threat is not mediating the effect between vision communication and innovation adoption (β = 0.04, 95% CI = [-0.04, 0.28], p = 0.55, 1000 bootstraps). I conducted causal mediation analysis using the 'mediation' package in the statistical software R (R Core Team, 2017; Tingley et al., 2014).

Table 7 displays the mean and standard deviations of all variables, separated by the manipulation (vision pitch or innovation pitch).

Table 1: correlation Table for each variable

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Manipulation (1)	-								
Managerial Openness (2)	0.07	-							
Leadership Threat (3)	0.05	-0.55***	-						
Innovation Adoption (4)	-0.05	0.05	0.07	-					
Age 31-40 (5)	-0.08	-0.03	0.05	-0.07	-				
Age 41-50 (6)	-0.14	0.02	-0.08	-0.01	-	-			
Age >50 (7)	0.2	0	0.03	0.07	-	-	-		
Top management position (8)	-0.06	0.02	0.12	0.15	0.02	-0.1	0.08	-	
Experience in position < 5 (9)	0.12	0.04	-0.19	0.24×	0.14	-0.51***	0.37**	-0.1	-

$0.001 = ***, 0.01 = **, 0.05 = *., 0.1 = \times$ "

Table 5: regression analysis Model 1-3

	y: Leadership Threat		
	Model 1	*Model 2*	*Model 3*
Intercept	1.4***(0.09)	1.73***(0.25)	4.12***(0.69)
Vision communication	0.04(0.14)	0.06(0.14)	0.03(1.22)
Managerial openness			-0.57**(0.16)
Manipulation vision: managerial openness			0.01(0.28)
Control Variables			
Age (baseline 31-40)			
41-50		-0.03(0.19)	-0.02(0.16)
Age >50		-0.23(0.21)	-0.18(0.18)
Position (baseline senior management)			
Top Management		0.08(0.16)	0.11(0.13)
Experience in current position (baseline long experience)			
1-5 years		-0.33+(0.2)	-0.29(0.17)
R-squared	0	0.08	0.38
F-statistic (df1/df2)	0.1(1/48)	0.8(5/44)	3.64**(7/42)
Wald F-test against competing Models (df.)		0.98(4)	9.91***(2)

a. dependent variable: innovation adoption decision
b. N=49

c. 0.001 = ***, 0.01 = **, 0.05 = *., 0.1 = ×"

Table 6: regression analysis Model 4-9

	Innovation Adoption Decision (IAD)[2]					
	Model 4	*Model 5*	*Model 6*	*Model 7*	*Model 8*	*Model 9*
Intercept	-0.12(0.99)	-2.19(1.71)	0.81 (0.42)	-0.46(1.09)	2.76(3.67)	0.55(5.06)
Vision communication			-0.18(0.61)	-0.27(0.64)	1.58(6.83)	1.54(6.85)
Managerial openness					-0.75(0.86)	-0.45(0.97)
Leadership threat	0.6 (0.69)	0.89(0.72)				0.55(0.86)
Manipulation vision: managerial openness					-0.4(1.53)	-0.4(1.54)
Control Variables						
Age (baseline 31-40)						
41-50		0.53 (0.83)		0.52(0.82)	0.54(0.84)	0.56(0.84)
Age >50		0.99 (0.97)		0.74(0.93)	0.78(0.97)	0.87(0.99)
Position (baseline senior management)						
Top Management		0.28 (0.74)		0.24(0.73)	0.23(0.73)	0.21(0.75)
Experience in current position (baseline long experience)						
1-5 years		1.34 (0.95)		1(0.87)	1.03(0.93)	1.2(0.99)
AIC	65.1	70.51	65.82	71.96	74.16	75.74
Log likelihood (df.)	-30.55 (2)	-29.25(6)	-30.91(2)	-29.98(6)	-29.08(8)	-28.87(9)
Likelihood ratio test against competing Models (df.)	2.6 (-4)			1.86(4)	1.8(2)	0.41(1)

a. dependent variable: innovation adoption decision
b. N=49
c. $0.001 = ***, 0.01 = **, 0.05 = *., 0.1 = \times$"

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[2] This model only represents a 'yes/no' item of IAD as explained in 'Methods'

Table 7: Means and Standard Deviations of all variables

	Vision	Innovation
Manipulation check		
Mean	3.27	3.18
S.D.	0.63	0.61
Leadership Threat		
Mean	1.45	1.4
S.D.	0.46	0.51
Managerial Openness		
Mean	4.41	4.35
S.D.	0.40	0.52
Innovation Adoption		
Mean	0.65	0.69
S.D.	0.49	0.47

Robustness check

I've ran additional analyses than reported in Model 4-7 to check whether there is a possible difference in the direct effect of vision communication on innovation adoption. I have chosen to measure two extra items. First, the direct effect of vision communication on willingness to support the innovation ($\beta = -0.03$, *S.E.* $= 0.26$, $p = 0.917$) (Cronbach's Alpha $= 0.786$). Second, the direct effect of vision communication on the number of fte top managers want to allocate to the innovation ($\beta = -0.35$, *S.E.* $= 0.29$, $p = 0.38$). The methods section reports how these items are measured. Despite the different items the results did not show any interaction either.

Non-results of models

To reflect on the outcomes of my survey I have conducted some post hoc interviews to verify and refute my results from different perspectives. These short interviews of 30 minutes are

done with an innovation lead who is experienced with starting and implementing bottom-up innovations, one middle-and one top manager. These interviews were informal and executed during lunch or break-out sessions.

The first discussion was about leadership threat. The insight was given that top managers do not feel threatened because the organizational culture encourages employees to execute bottom-up behavior. The organization needs new and ambitious input to secure long term survival. In addition, the hierarchal distance between i.e. a middle-manager and a CEO is too big. The most threat was expected between the operational floor and a middle-manager. This was not my unit of analysis.

Second, during the interviews it came to surface that top managers are actually yearning for bottom-up champions who challenges the status quo. They (the innovation lead and top manager) were speaking about – in their opinion – invisible hierarchal boundaries which gives them the feeling of being lonely at the top, where they are actually eager to support initiatives. That summarizes their managerial openness and overshadows any feeling of leadership threat.

DISCUSSION

I investigate the effect of upward vision communication on the innovation decision-making of top managers. This is of interest for both middle- and top managers because this study takes the first steps in unfolding effects of upward vision communication by champions. In addition, insights in organizational decision-making (from a top manager perspective) are generated as well.

Literature suggests middle-managers to formulate and communicate a captivating vision to successfully champion an innovation (Howell & Higgins, 1990), however the upward effect of vision communication remained unexplored. A long stream of literature researches or the (bottom-up) championing activities or the top-down communication of visions. In my study I bring parts of these two streams of research together. The arguments I raised in the hypotheses section are not supported by survey outcomes. However, two findings on leadership threat and managerial openness give starting points for further research.

Theoretical implications

The central contribution of this study is that I challenged the existing theory of vision communication by discovering the effect of vision communication in upward direction on innovation adoption. In doing so, I expand the theory by testing the effects from a middle-managers perspective, as current literature (i.e. Shamir et al, 2018; Stam et al, 2014; Berson et al, 2001) only speaks about the effect from a leader's point of view. I argued that theoretical contributions of vision communication would change by reversing its direction of communication, predominantly through personal arguments (Sijbom et al 2015; Burris, 2012) from an hierarchal and positional perspective (Fast et al, 2014; Sosik & dinger, 2007). My

results do not support these arguments, thus the question remains whether the change of vision communication direction really is experienced as threat or that it actually is encouraged by and relates with organizational culture.

The following implications follow the order of the theoretical framework (figure 2). I hypothesized that vision communication of middle-managers would be experienced as threat, i.e. overstepping boundaries and questioning leaders authority. This turns out to be unsupported. However, there is a marginal effect that shows top managers shorter in position (< 5 years) experience less threat than 6 or more years of experience. This may guide future research to get more theoretical understanding of the relationship between experience in position and leadership threat and I advise to study these subjects together with organizational culture. Top managers with short experience in position perhaps are more used to low hierarchal organizational cultures, in contrary with longer sitting top managers who also carry their experience of more traditional and hierarchal organizations and former organizational transformations. The study of Bruch & Walter (2007) can be used as a starting point.

Second, a direct negative effect is found between managerial openness and leadership threat, which displays a common managerial characteristic of the respondents. Previous research (Burris, 2012) already shows that open managers are more willing to reward people who speak up. My study provides first steps of clarification for one factor: open managers do not feel threatened by their subordinates, therefore managerial characteristics seems to play a crucial role in hindering or rewarding bottom-up activities.

Despite the scientific knowledge about threat, my results did not find any evidence for such experience. This can imply the following: the organizational culture of my unit of analysis

encourages bottom-up behavior, therefore vision communication is experienced rather positive than threatening. Second, the findings of leadership threat that I use as reference material are products of interviews and surveys with subordinates. In contrast, my study and survey executed a top-down approach. Based on my results, top managers do not feel threatened. An alternative view on the absence of threat is that top managers do not want to express such feelings towards colleagues or scholars. The opposite can either be true: in former research, subordinates/middle-managers describe a situation as if their manager feel threatened when they challenge the status quo. This perhaps is not or partly true. It can either be true that the middle-managers' bottom-up activities did not result in the outcome they hoped for. It is possible that because of the negative result they blame it to their top manager feeling threatened, instead of accepting the negative outcome due to valid arguments.

Finally, in line with Burris (2012), organizations might want to encourage creativeness and innovation. This studies' outcome gives the unexpected material – not via statistical evidence, but due to post hoc interviews - to study the gap between managerial openness and middle-managers upward efforts. In general, respondents reacted different than hypothesized. Decisions on innovation adoption were not different in the presence or absence of vision communication. In addition, leadership threat and managerial openness did not interact between variables as expected.

Interviews give first clarification and bring up thoughts of the challenge not laying in the willingness to positively decide on championed innovations, but in the lack of innovations being raised from bottom-up. Literature status that this is due to i.e. organizational inertia (Shane et al, 1995), hierarchal structure of innovation (Kickul and Gundry, 2001), absence of

courage to speak up (Milliken et al, 2003) and the embracement of the status quo by the middle-managers selves (Huy, 2001; Dopson & Neumann, 1998). Therefore, it is of interest to track down the consistency of the following triangle: (1) an organizational culture invites middle-managers to vision up, (2) the managerial openness of top management encourages such behavior as well, (3) however, there is an absence of (or: there might be more) employees showing champions behavior.

Managerial implications

This study holds a suggestion for both middle- and top managers. Middle-managers should not worry about upward vision communication. The corporate culture stimulates entrepreneurship and innovation thus top management rather encourages than refuses promotional and inspirational championing behavior.

Top managers should be aware that their openness (which is a characteristic and skill) towards bottom-up behavior holds a relationship with the actual bottom-up championing attempts. An organizational culture in itself might prescribe (on paper) – championing and entrepreneurial behavior. However, people within the organization shape the real culture and therefore awareness of leadership behavior in relation to the actual culture an organization prescribes is important.

Limitations and directions for future research

Reversing the lens from top-down towards bottom-up vision communication means entering a novel field of research. Vision communication is more complex than I explain in my study. The effect of it is a cohesion between sender and receiver. Theoretically, a vision can be distinguished from non-vision (i.e. a pitch or presentation) by its aspects (Stam et al, 2014),

something that is clearly done in the manipulation check (appendix II). However, my study shows that the practical evaluation and judgement of a vision is different than the evaluation on paper. I was not able to test the real difference between the vision and non-vision group. Future research should also focus on the subjective aspect of visions to – in advance – distinguish it from a pitch or speech and successfully execute the manipulation check.

Elaborating on vision communication, with introducing leadership threat I again enter a domain of study that is not explored in full yet. Previous findings of leadership threat are in the relation between the operating floor and managers (Burris, 2012; Detert & Burris, 2007) and operating floor and leaders (Sijbom, 2015; Milliken et al, 2003). Most of the these outcomes (i.e. Milliken et al, 2003) are results of interviews with subordinates speaking about their leaders in a different era than nowadays. Which differs from my approach: instead, I questioned the leaders about feelings of threat themselves in an environment where bottom-up behavior is strongly encouraged. I assume, supported by post hoc interviews, that a second argument of not feeling threatened is the hierarchal distance between sender and receiver. In some cases it differed three or four layers. Future research should narrow its respondents scope with maximum one layer of hierarchical difference and should try to find a hybrid model in surveying both sender and receiver. My suggestion would be to study the direct relation between the operating floor and middle-managers to in parallel tackle the survey respondents challenge and discovery the suggestion that middle-managers are actually status quo holder themselves (Huy, 2001; Dopson & Neumann, 1998).

The same approach holds for managerial openness. Future research should embrace a hybrid model to find a reliable outcome of top managers really being open for upward vision

and champion behavior or not. Additionally, my study explores only one managerial characteristic (managerial openness). Other characteristics (i.e. extraversion, values, power distance, quality of the relationship with the champion) (Burris 2012), might give more and reliable variation and interaction between variables.

Regarding innovation adoption, I included only one phase of adoption (the decision to support, invest euros and allocate resources) as some studies grasped every phase together, denying the differences per phase. Future research should include every phase of adoption, while emphasizing the differences. Some respondents replied that it is not easy to decide to invest while not being part of the initiation phase. Second, my study does not support positive or negative interaction of upward vision communication. This at least requests this topic to be replicated as literature hints that (interacting-)effects of the chosen variables should be there.

While my study did a first attempt in investigating the effect of upward vision communication, it is a single organization study based on partly new constructs and items with a low response rate. This study bears replication and further investigation on theoretical constructs and the operationalization of variables. My hope is that the insights developed provide starting points to further investigate the interaction between upward vision communication or upward leadership behavior on top managers behavior and judgement.

CONCLUSION

In contrary with what I hypothesized, my study does not find significant interaction between upward vision communication and innovation decision-making. Still, literature hints towards ties between bottom-up activities, leadership threat and decision-making and my study elaborates on that with two findings. First, significant direct negative interaction was found between managerial openness and leadership threat. This opens the door to further investigate upward vision communication in relation to managerial characteristics. Second, marginal interaction is found between short working experience and experiencing less leadership threat. This invites successors to discuss this finding further together with organizational culture. For top managers – supported by work of Burris (2012) –, results show that managerial openness is of value to middle-managers as it encourages them to speak and vision up and in parallel creates space for an open culture of bottom-up innovation.

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APPENDICES

Appendix I – *items innovation adoption decision*

- "As manager I consider to seriously evaluate the proposed innovation from technical, financial and strategic perspectives"

- "As manager I am willing to support by funding the innovation"

- "Given the innovation raised by the middle-manager I am willing to give .."

Adapted from Damanpour & Schneider, 2006

- I am willing to invest (between €0 - €150.000,-) euros

- I am willing to allocate (between 0 – 5 fte) resources

Appendix II – *operationalization of vignettes*

One of your middle-managers is entering your room, asking fifteen minutes to pitch an innovation:

Imagine NN Group ten years from now. Even a stronger insurance brand than we already are. A reliable partner for our stakeholders. Internationally widespread and financially healthy. That's what we want, right? But watch out, nowadays competition (Aegon) shows intention to grow by M&A, just as we did and even disruptive startups (BrightPensioen) enter our market. To remain market leader our organization should instantly innovate and reinvent. Our collective must become agile to challenge and overcome environmental forces. I am convinced this vision should be a central topic in higher and lower level organizational goals.

-- the upper part reflects the manipulation of vision communication. --

A lot of good innovations pop-up in our organization. But, due to our organizational size and globally located offices a lot of these innovation are not captured effectively. We should stimulate the development of these innovations in our organization by providing these projects the attention and resources they need. I have been part of the development of a new software solution that manages our innovation portfolio globally via a smart algorithm. Not only will new ideas be shared worldwide through a single mouse click, the platform will also open our organization to leveraging its networks and expertise even more. It empowers us to create a platform in which all initiatives, both accepted and rejected are visible to all colleagues. And over time it is even capable to predict reliable success chances of an innovation. I ask you to allocate me 150*k* and 5*fte* to further develop this project. With that support I will be able to implement the software to the business in six months (The Netherlands only). After a year it

will be rolled out in the EU and within 1,5 year it will be globally used software. From the start on it will allow us to manage our portfolio efficiently and speed up innovation to stay ahead from competition.

Appendix III – *items managerial openness*

- "As manager I am open to suggestions"

- "As manager I give serious consideration to good ideas"

- "As manager I give fair evaluation to good suggestions raised"

- "I have supported bottom-up innovations before"

- "Middle-managers in general often raise good innovations"

Adapted from Ashford et al, 1998

Appendix IV – *items leadership threat*

- "By raising his/her vision I might lose status in the organization".

- "By raising his/her vision for the organization my ability to succeed in my position will be questioned".

- "By raising his/her vision I might lose face".

- "By raising his/her vision I feel hurt".

- "By raising his/her vision the middle-manager overstepped his boundaries".

Adapted from Lam, 2013

Appendix V – *control variables*

- Gender

- Age

- Education

- Country employed

- Business Unit employed

- Department employed

- Type of education

- Position

- Experience as senior manager

- Experience in current position

Appendix VI – *items manipulation checks*

The middle-manager…

- … "paints a compelling vision of the future for our organization"

- … "paints an abstract, long-term vision of the future"

- … "inspires to move the collective towards an organizational goal"

- … "translates his strategic plan to operational activities"

Adapted from Podsakoff et al, 1990