# Middle Managers as the Drivers of Positive Cultural Change

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**Abstract**
Organisational change, including organisational restructures, impact on the culture of organisations, often negatively. This can have flow on effects reducing organisational performance. There is a myriad of literature pertaining to organisational change and organisational culture, however, there is a relative scarcity of studies on how organisations can ensure change is successful and sustainable without impacting negatively on the culture and performance of the organisation. This study explores whether middle managers in a New South Wales (Australia) Local Government Organisation, undergoing major organisational change, could influence the organisational culture positively. We used one-on-one coaching sessions with nine middle managers as an intervention and used The Organisational Culture Index (OCI) as a cultural analysis tool to compare the sample group over time determine the influence of middle managers on organisational culture during times of change. This study supports the findings of other research in that effective organisations have positive leadership and in turn a positive organisational culture. However, this study differentiates from these typical studies by examining the influence of middle managers. These leaders, who have many points of contact for influence within the organisation, are found to have the best possible opportunity to influence organisational culture by interpreting organisational strategy set by the executive into operationally based outcomes.

Keywords: organisational culture, middle managers, OCI, positive deviance

## Introduction

Organisational change, including organisational restructures, impact on the culture of the organisation, often negatively. Connor (1992) states that change which employees believe they have no control over, leads to "feelings of victimisation and unempowerment, … covert undermining of organisational leadership, and actively promoting a negative attitude in others" (p. 55). Managing the consequences of change where employees feel they have no input, threatens their job security and reduces job satisfaction and ultimately impacts negatively on organisational culture and organisational performance (Bruhn 2004 and Probst 2003). Organisations must ensure that this negative impact is managed through the utilisation of effective leadership to ensure employees do not feel disempowered (Connor 1992 and Roan, Lafferty & Loudoun, 2002).

High performing organisations have leaders who are able to influence employee satisfaction and organisational culture (Maurer 2010). These leaders create an environment that is conducive to high performing employees and ultimately organisational performance. The influencing behaviours of effective leaders create, change, develop, and influence behaviours within the organisation. Effective leaders are aware of

their values and beliefs, and focus on building morale within their staff. An alignment of leader's and employee's behaviours and values, builds high quality relationships and trust (Walumbwa 2010). These high quality relationships and trust are conducive to a positive and engaging organisational culture, leading to increased organisational performance.

In creating the drive needed to develop and sustain positive performance and culture, leaders are required who have access to many points of influence. These leaders are not found at the top of the organisation; those who are most effective are found in the middle levels of the organisation. These middle managers have influence up, down, and across the organisation. They are typically positioned between the managers who are developing the strategic direction of the organisation and the managers who are managing the day to day operations. Middle managers often form the largest single group of managers within an organisation and therefore their collective behaviours, rituals, customs and practices are observed by employees above and below in the hierarchy.

Middle managers understand and contribute to the overall organisational strategy and the context by which the strategy is developed, as well as having access to, and understanding of, the operational levels of the organisation, and the subcultures and complexities which lie within. Little is known, however, of the direct influence these middle managers can have to support and improve organisational performance during change – where organisational performance typically reduces, and sometimes stalls.

The purpose of the research study is to understand whether middle managers influence organisational culture positively through understanding and replicating positive behaviours during times of planned organisational change.

## Organisational Culture

Organisational culture is principally defined from a human perspective, in a qualitative context focussing on the beliefs, values and behaviours of a defined organisation or team (Schein 2004). Through the exposition of these beliefs, values and behaviours, employees contribute to the culture within their own teams and departments. The combination of these individual cultural components then creates and fashions the overarching culture of the entire organisation (Schein 2004, Drew 2009, Kleiner & Corrigan 1989). An organisation is therefore the sum of its components, including its teams (Seidman & McCauley 2009). To develop a clear understanding of an organisation's culture, its individual teams must be studied to comprehend the full cultural picture of the organisation.

## Organisational Culture Index

The Organisational Culture Index (OCI) was developed to focus principally on the layers of an organisation's culture and their integration. The OCI seeks to expose the behavioural norms and assumptions operating within an organisation, a department or a team, to reveal the actual behaviors employees believe are required to be demonstrated to be successful and create a 'fit' within the organisation. Cooke & Lafferty (2005) define this as, "[t]he behaviors

that organisational members believe are required of them in order to fit in and meet expectations within their given organisation" (p.56).

These cultural elements are described as behavioural clusters. There are three behavioural clusters: constructive, passive/defensive and aggressive/defensive (see Figure 1, below).
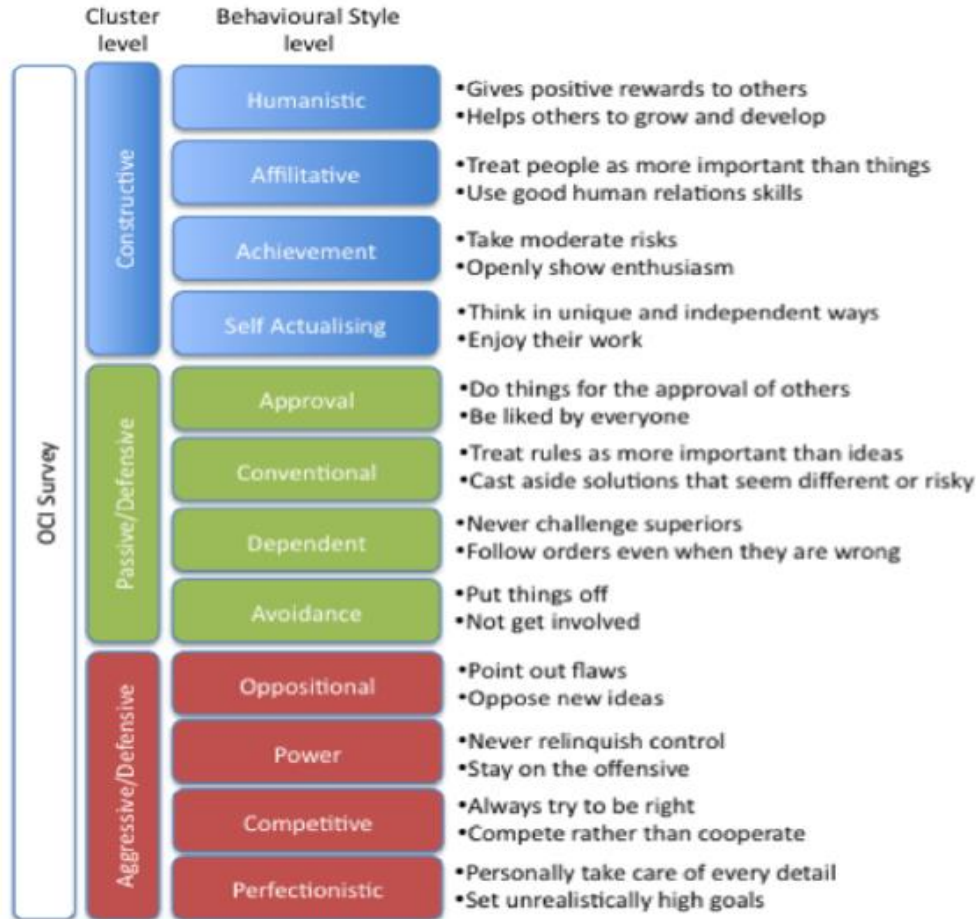


**Figure 1: Diagram illustrating the behavioural clusters, styles and underlying behaviours in the OCI (Adapted from Suzmal 1998)**

Cooke & Lafferty (2005) found organisations which display a dominance across the constructive behavioural cluster are more effective organisations than organisations that display a dominance across the passive/defensive and aggressive/defensive behavioural clusters. Organisations with dominant constructive behaviours employ staff who are encouraged to interact with people. These people approach tasks in ways that help them meet their higher-order satisfaction needs. This finding conforms with Crom & Bertels (1999) notion of positive deviance behaviours and their alignment with high performing individuals.

Organisations with dominant passive/defensive cultures employ staff who believe they must interact with people in ways that will not threaten their own security. Further, organisations with dominant aggressive/defensive cultures employ staff who are expected to approach tasks in forceful ways to protect their status and security (see Figure 1, above).

These three behavioural clusters are further segmented into twelve integrated behavioural styles. Each of the twelve behavioural styles have a set of behaviours which sit underneath them describing what you would expect to see and hear if you observed and interviewed employees within a team or an organisation displaying these behavioural styles – see Figure 2, below. These twelve behavioural styles are discussed further in Table 1 (Methods Section).
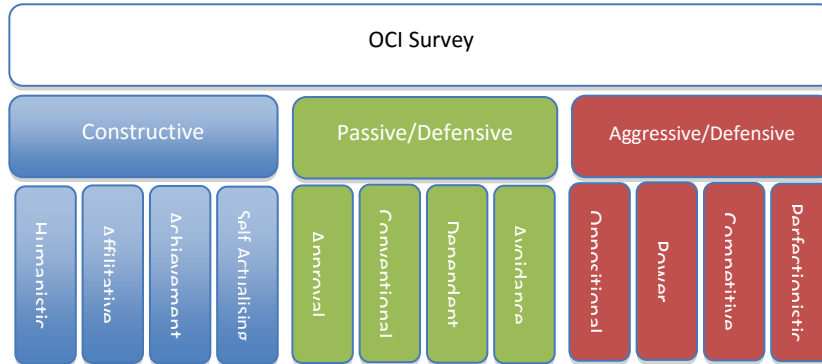


**Figure 2: The definition of these behavioural clusters and contained behavioural styles is elaborated further in Table 1 below (adapted from Szumal 1998, p.3,8,9).**

## Middle managers as Influencers of Organisational Cultural Change

As discussed, cultural change requires the influence of leaders. The literature does not clearly differentiate which leaders in an organisational hierarchy have the most influence on culture. De Witte & van Muijen (1999) discuss a top down or bottom up approach to cultural change. De Witte & van Muijen (1999) found that a different approach is required depending on the outcome to be achieved. If the desired outcome is to focus on behaviour alone then a top down approach may work. With a top down approach leaders at the top of the organisational hierarchy will overtly display the appropriate behavioural norms. This approach relies solely on the influence of power through the structure of the organisation and not on the strength of high trusting relationships.

A bottom up approach to organisational culture change relies on the leaders throughout the organisational structure with high quality trusting relationships to influence the culture. A bottom up approach is a participative approach which includes the lower levels of an organisation in developing the change initiative. This approach acknowledges the subcultures of an organisation however fails to consider the strategic input of management which may hold information which is currently not available to the lower levels of the organisation, yet are pertinent to the change.

The middle ground between the top down and bottom up approaches is an approach which considers the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches. An approach which understands and contributes to the overall organisational strategy and the context by which the strategy is developed as well as the having access to and understanding of the operational levels of the organisation and the subcultures and complexities which lie within. The literature is comprehensive in discussing top down approaches De Witte & Van Muijen (1999); Chen

(2012) and Smith (2010) as well as bottom up approaches from Schein (2004), Seidman & McCauley (2009) and Kritsonis (2004). However, it is absent of any approach which encompasses both. The level of the organisation's heirarchy which is in a position to encompass both a top down and bottom up approach to change is the middle management. They are contributors to, and implementers of, organisational strategy (see Figure 3, below). They are often measured on the outcomes of organisational strategy at an operational level and are the masters of interpretation of the strategy at an operational level (Chen 2012).



**Figure 3: An example of the hierarchal influence of middle managers. This example is taken from the organisation under study**

## Context of the research organisation and its influence on the research design

One large regional Australian Local Government Organisation (LGO) agreed to participate in the study. This organisation was selected as it was undertaking a major restructure. The participating LGO's organisational hierarchy includes a level of management referred to as 'Middle Management'. Fifteen managers initially agreed to participate in the study. Of the fifteen, six employees resigned from their positions, either for promotion or resigning from the organisation, leaving nine middle managers within the study.

## Method

Cultural analysis was based on the OCI cultural analysis tool. In evaluating the utility of the OCI, a number of considerations were evaluated. Yauch & Steudel (2003) determined there is no 'ideal' tool and therefore a tool which may work well in one environment or organisation may not work well in another. A study undertaken in 2007 compared 49 cultural analysis instruments (Jung, Scott, Davies, Bower, Whalley, McNally & Mannion, 2007) to understand their effectiveness measured against seven criteria, namely description, appropriateness, reliability, validity, responsiveness, interpretability and application. The results of the Jung et al., (2007) study found the OCI scored in the highest rankings for the first four of these eight criteria and second highest ranking for the last four criteria. This study provided the confirmation that the OCI was an appropriate,

highly validated and reliable tool to use for measuring culture within an organisation.

The OCI is a cultural analysis tool which was developed by Cooke and Lafferty in 1988. The OCI seeks to measure and expose the behavioural norms and assumptions operating within an organisation, a section or a team, to reveal the construal of the culture and the fundamental behaviors (task oriented and people orientated) required to be accepted in the organisation. The resultant measurement of the OCI is divided into three behavioural clusters consisting of constructive styles, considered to be effective behaviours contributing to organisational culture and conversely passive/defensive and aggressive/defensive styles considered to be less effective behaviours contributing to organisational culture. These clusters are further delineated into twelve individual behaviours or 'styles' of thinking, behaving, and interacting (Szumal 1998). An illustration of the relationship between the clusters and styles is illustrated in (Figure 2, above), however for the ease of the reader is illustrated again below. Table 1, below, provides definitions for each of these behavioural styles.

**Table 1: Definitions of OCI Behavioural Clusters and Behavioural Styles**

| Behavioural Cluster | Definition | Behavioural Style | Definition |
|---|---|---|---|
| Constructive | Employees are encouraged to interact with people and approach tasks in ways that will help them to meet their higher order satisfaction needs for esteem, affiliation and self-actualisation | Achievement | Employees set challenging but realistic goals, establish plans to reach those goals, and pursue them with enthusiasm |
| | | Self Actualizing | Employees enjoy their work, develop themselves and take on new and interesting activities. |
| | | Humanistic | Employees are supportive, constructive and open to influence in their dealings with others |
| | | Affiliative | Employees are friendly, cooperative and sensitive to the satisfaction of their team members |
| Passive/Defensive | Employees believe they must interact with people in ways that will not threaten their own security of employment | Approval | Employees are expected to agree with, gain approval of and be liked by others |
| | | Conventional | Employees are to conform, follow the rules and make a good impression |
| | | Dependent | Employees do what they are told and clear all decisions with their supervisors |

| | | Avoidance | Employees shift responsibilities to others and avoid any possibility for being blamed for a mistake |
|---|---|---|---|
| Aggressive/Defensive | Employees are expected to approach tasks in forceful ways to protect their status and security of employment | Oppositional | Employees are critical, oppose ideas of others and make sae but ineffectual decisions |
| | | Power | Employees take charge, control subordinates and yield to the demands of their supervisors |
| | | Competitive | Employees operate in a 'win-lose' framework and work against each other |
| | | Perfectionistic | Employees avoid mistakes, keep track of everything and work long hours to attain narrowly defined objectives |

The OCI is designed to measure culture across organisations and within organisations such as comparing departments or teams within an organisation. When utilised consistently over a continuum of years the OCI allows for a comparison of culture progression of the organisation and/or teams within the organisation over this period of time.

The OCI has been used frequently and consistently by the participating LGO since 2004. It is therefore, a familiar instrument to all of the middle managers within the study and provides data over a continuum of years to enable a longitudinal assessment of its culture.

In the context of this study, the tool was utilised to compare the sample group over time. This will be conducted in three steps; first, a baseline measurement of the culture was carried out using the OCI. Second, the planned intervention (below) was implemented, and finally a post-test measurement, utilising the OCI, was undertaken to determine if there has been a positive increase in the means between the baseline and post-test results. The baseline and post-test survey results were analysed to determine if there was a significant positive impact on the organisation's culture as a result of the positive influence of the middle managers.

**The intervention**

The researchers developed intervention plans for the individual middle managers and took them through a series of coaching sessions with the aim of changing the pattern of leadership behaviours to influence the culture in a positive manner. The middle managers were asked to identify other leaders within the organisation whom the middle manager believed lead higher performing teams than others in the organisation. The process involves identifying the salient positive behaviours of the leaders of higher performing teams, with the aim of understanding and replicating these behaviours to enact positive change.

There were no criteria set by the researchers to the middle manager on how they should identify the other leaders within the organisation who lead higher performing teams. The identification was based purely on

the middle manager's perception of the behaviours and what a higher performing team is. This was to ensure the process was true to the principles of positive deviance which require participants to be implicitly and explicitly involved in the journey and the solution towards a positive organisational culture change (Lewis 2009). The identification by the middle manager of these behaviours provided a vehicle for the middle manager, with the assistance of the researcher, to understand why these particular identified leaders of higher performing teams are successful in the organisation when others may not be.

## Data Analysis and Review

A t-test for dependent means (two-tailed at p ≤ 0.10) was chosen to be the appropriate statistical technique due to the independent variable (influence of middle managers) measured within subjects and having only two levels (baseline and post-test) and the dependent variable (organisational culture) being quantitative in nature being measured on an interval level (Jaccard & Becker, 2010). A within subjects design is utilised when all participants of the study are exposed to the same intervention. An interval level of measurement is when the difference between the two measurements is meaningful, that is the differences in the distance along the scale are equally distant. Analysis is undertaken between the baseline and post-test of the OCI results utilising the resultant set of mean scores at two levels: level one – the overall cultural level and level two – the cultural level at each individual OCI behavioural cluster, to establish whether there is a significant positive impact of the independent variable on the dependent variable.

A two-tailed test is utilised to test for the possibility of the relationship in both directions between the baseline and post-test results. The 'constructive' behavioural cluster component of the survey is seeking to establish a positive difference in the means (increase in constructive styles of behaviour) due to the intervention whereas the passive/defensive and aggressive/defensive component of the survey is seeking to establish a negative difference in the means (decrease in passive/defensive and aggressive/defensive styles of behaviour) due to the intervention.

Four hypotheses have been developed which will be tested empirically with our study of change in the LGO. These hypotheses are:

$H_1$ There is a significant difference between means of the baseline and post-test survey OCI survey results
$H_2$ There is a significant positive difference between the means of the baseline and post-test OCI survey results across the constructive behavioural clusters
$H_3$ There is a significant negative difference between the means of the baseline and post-test OCI survey results across the passive/defensive behavioural clusters
$H_4$ There is a significant negative difference between the means of the baseline and post-test OCI survey results across the aggressive/defensive behavioural clusters

## Findings

### First level – Overall Cultural Level

The sample population was surveyed utilising the OCI cultural analysis to determine if there was a significant difference between the means of the baseline and post-test data of the sampled population and therefore establish if there was a significant positive impact of the independent variable on the dependent variable across the overall OCI survey. The independent variable being 'the influence of middle managers' and the dependent variable is 'organisational culture'.

Table 2 demonstrates there was a slight undesired movement in the organisational culture of -0.15 difference in the means between the baseline and post-tests across the three behavioural clusters of constructive, passive/defensive and aggressive/defensive (definitions of these clusters are described previously within the chapter). However, utilising a dependent means t-test (two tailed) it was determined this was not a statistically significant movement at a confidence level of $p \leq 0.10$. This result is not statistically significant in relation to the hypothesis, however it is significant in the context of the study being undertaken throughout a period of major organisational change. This significance will be discussed below.

**Table 2: Baseline and Post-test Results for the OCI Survey for the overall Sample Population**

| | OCI overall | |
|---|---|---|
| | Baseline | Post-test |
| **Mean** | 33.07 | 32.94 |
| **Mean Diff** | -0.15 | |
| **SD** | 124.69 | |
| **t value** | -1.398598 | |
| **p value** | 0.164825 (not significant) | |

These results suggest that although there was a slight desired difference in the means at $p \leq 0.10$, this difference was not significant enough to confidently state that the influence of middle managers did have an effect on the organisation's culture. The study rejects

Hypothesis 1:

$H_1$    *There is a significant difference between means of the baseline and post-test survey OCI survey results* – rejected

### Second Level – Cultural Level at each individual OCI Behavioural Cluster

The data was further segmented into the three OCI behavioural clusters of constructive, passive/defensive and aggressive/defensive for further analysis. These clusters were analysed independent of each other, to establish if there was a significant desired impact of the independent variable on the dependent variable within the clusters. The independent variable being 'the influence of middle managers' and the dependent variable being 'organisational culture'.

This segmentation seeks to demonstrate a positive difference in the baseline and post-test means for the constructive behavioural cluster (an increase in the means of these effective behaviours) to establish whether the middle managers influence had a desired positive impact on the organisational culture. Conversely the analysis seeks to demonstrate a negative difference (decrease in the means of these less effective behaviours) within the passive/defensive and aggressive/defensive behavioural clusters to establish if the middle managers influence had a desired negative impact on the organisational culture. Figure 4 shows the desired outcomes.
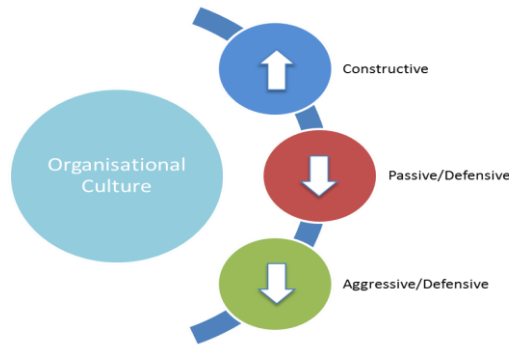


**Figure 4: Desired movement within the OCI Behavioural Clusters**

The statistical analysis of the data within the behavioural clusters has been summarised in Figure 5. This figure demonstrates there was a slight positive difference attained within the constructive behavioural cluster of 0.60 between means of the baseline and post-test of the OCI survey. Conversely, the figure demonstrates there was a slight negative difference in the means attained in the passive/defensive and aggressive/defensive clusters of -0.37 and -0.67 respectively. Both the desired positive difference in the constructive cluster and the desired negative difference in the passive/defensive and aggressive/defensive clusters demonstrate the intervention between the baseline and post-test OCI survey achieved a slight movement towards a more desired organisational culture.

The next section will analyse this data to determine if these differences are statistically significant. This significance will be discussed below.
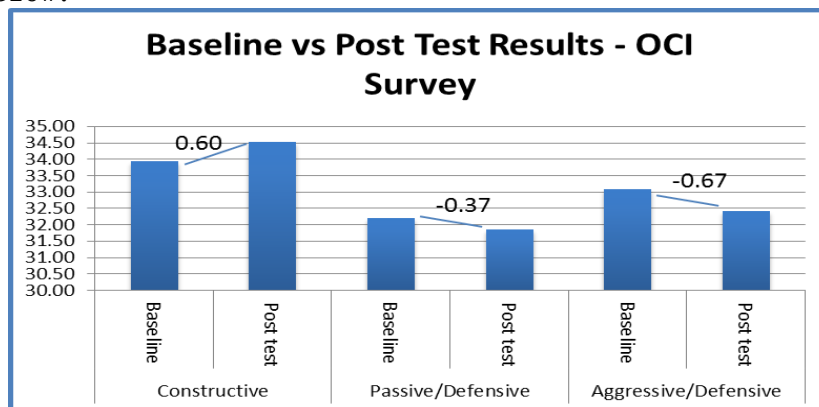


**Figure 5: Baseline vs Post Test Results from the OCI Survey detailing differences between the means of the Behavioural Clusters Constructive**

Table 6 demonstrates there was a desired positive difference (0.60) in the means between the baseline and post-tests found within the

constructive behavioural cluster. These results suggest there was enough of a desired positive difference to confidently state that the influence of middle managers did have a significant positive effect, at p0.10, on the organisational culture. The study accepts Hypothesis 2:

$H_2$     *There is a significant positive difference between the means of the baseline and post-test OCI survey results across the constructive behavioural clusters*

**Table 6: Baseline vs Post-test Results from the OCI survey for the Constructive Behavioural Cluster**

| | Constructive | |
|---|---|---|
| | Baseline | Post-test |
| Mean | 33.93 | 34.53 |
| Mean Diff | 0.60 | |
| SD | 30.6 | |
| t value | 3.882123 | |
| p value | 0.000438 (significant) | |

**Passive/Defensive**

The data (Table 7) demonstrates that there was a desired negative difference in the culture (-0.37) between the baseline and post-test means of the passive/defensive behavioural cluster. These results suggest there was enough of a desired significant difference to confidently state that the influence of middle managers had a desired effect on reducing the passive/defensive behavioural style. The study accepts Hypothesis 3:

$H_3$     *There is a significant negative difference between the means of the baseline and post-test OCI survey results across the passive/defensive behavioural clusters*

**Table 7: Baseline vs Post-test Results from the OCI survey for the Passive/Defensive Behavioural Cluster**

| | Passive/Defensive | |
|---|---|---|
| | Baseline | Post-test |
| Mean | 32.20 | 31.84 |
| Mean Diff | -0.37 | |
| SD | 35.75 | |
| t value | -2.181862 | |
| p value | 0.035922 (significant) | |

Aggressive/Defensive

The data (Table 8) shows there was a desired negative difference in the organisational culture (-0.67) between the baseline and post-tests means found within the aggressive/defensive behavioural cluster. These results suggest there was enough of a desired negative difference at p≤0.10, to confidently state that the influence of middle managers had a desired effect on reducing the aggressive/defensive behavioural style. Therefore, the study accepts Hypothesis 4:

$H_4$     *There is a significant negative difference between the means of the baseline and post-test OCI survey results across the aggressive/defensive behavioural clusters*

**Table 8: Baseline vs Post-test Results from the OCI survey for the aggressive/Defensive Behavioural Cluster**

|  | Aggressive/Defensive | |
|---|---|---|
|  | Baseline | Post-test |
| Mean | 33.08 | 32.41 |
| Mean Diff | -0.67 | |
| SD | 26.26 | |
| t value | -4.66430 | |
| p value | 0.00004 (significant) | |

The study went on to further analyse the compilation of behavioural styles based on the segmentation of the data into the twelve behavioural styles contained within the clusters:

- constructive cluster  - humanistic, affiliative, achievement and self-actualising
- passive/defensive cluster  - approval, conventional, dependent and avoidance
- aggressive/defensive cluster - oppositional, power, competitive and perfectionistic

However, it is not the purpose of this paper to present these data findings here.

## Discussion

### Impact of Organisational Restructuring on Organisational Culture

Organisational change, including organisational restructures, impact on the culture of organisations, often negatively. Roan, Lafferty & Loudoun, (2002) found organisational restructuring caused consistent negative impacts on the job security, job satisfaction, commitment and wellbeing and accordingly employee satisfaction, organisational culture and organisational performance. The more dissatisfied employees are with their organisation the more frequently employees will become disengaged from the organisation and display disengaged behaviours such as work avoidance (Probst 2003). These studies would suggest the organisational restructure which occurred during the study intervention, would adversely impact on employee satisfaction and ultimately the organisational culture.

The results of this study found the replication of positive deviance behaviours identified within the constructive behaviours styles of the OCI, were able to counteract the negative impacts normally associated with organisational restructures. The modification of the middle managers leadership behaviours were able to influence and maintain employees previous levels of job satisfaction, commitment and wellbeing to the organisation. These findings were supported with statistically significant desired results found within the constructive styles of behaviour. This finding is significant in response to the research question and concludes middle managers can influence organisational culture positively in the context of change, through understanding and replicating PD behaviours within their teams.

The process of specifically identifying the positive deviance behaviours of constructive leaders drives a more effective constructive culture which ultimately results in increased organisational culture and performance (Jones 2006) and (Cooke & Rousseau 1988). Organisations with dominant constructive behaviours employ staff who are encouraged to interact with people and approach tasks in ways that help them meet their higher-order satisfaction needs resulting in a significant positive correlation between organisational culture and job satisfaction (Sempane 2002).

This study concludes an organisation can minimise the negative impacts of organisational structural change on organisational culture utilising an opportunity-centred participative process which intrinsically includes a process of trust, respect and dignity.

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