On 15 June members of the NSW branch AMSIG met at Centre for English Teaching (CET), The University of Sydney, for their third session of the year. Aparna Jacob, English Australia Board member and Academic Manager (University Pathways) at CET facilitated a stimulating presentation and group discussion on the topic of 'The Dichotomy of Power in Middle Management.'

Aparna began by describing the 'role conflict' that many middle managers can suffer from where they are not sure of their place in an organisation. They can be stuck between 2 power groups: one higher up the hierarchy and one below them on the organisational hierarchy. In the ELICOS contexts this often translates as upper management and teaching staff respectively.

This sandwiched positioning means that middle managers often find themselves doing 'vertical code switching.' 'Code switching' is a term from applied linguistics which is normally applied to people who are bilingual or multilingual and switch quickly between languages when speaking. However, management theory has adapted this term to apply it to situations where managers have to switch between communicating between 2 different hierarchical groups in their organisation. Depending on which group they are interacting with, managers will need to adapt their style of communication accordingly (high power or low power communication).

Group discussion: Discuss what bi-directional pressures you feel in your role as a middle manager.

The groups mentioned the following pressures:

- Balancing class averages and steps (pressure from above)
- Lack of information from above
- Necessary teacher cuts
- Deciding which information is appropriate to share with teachers and other teams
- Timetabling (pressure from teachers)
- Resistance to change (from below)

Aparna carried on to discuss how middle managers can be more prone to stress and anxiety than both frontline staff and high level managers. In addition, the steeper the hierarchy in an organisation, the more stress is caused.

She also stressed that research shows that middle managers are crucial to employee engagement and that their role in organisations is pivotal. However, middle managers have been described in management literature as a 'critical but neglected group.'

Group discussion: Brainstorm challenging situations at work followed by suggestions of how to approach these challenges.

The following situations were mentioned by the group:

- When staff say 'that's not in my job description'
- When underperforming teachers don't see the issue

- Toxic or difficult individuals on staff who threaten positive staffroom culture
- Implementing and 'selling' directives from above
- Delivering the message about planned changes
- Closing classes at late notice to maintain target class averages
- Feeling powerless if not included in higher level discussions regarding course fees and marketing

Aparna concluded the session by saying that one strategy for dealing with the role conflict that is a part of being a middle manager is to see the various aspects of your roles as integrated rather than as separate identities. She also said that being aware of your strengths and weaknesses and how you contribute to your organisation helps because you can work to your strengths and be confident that you are making valuable contributions. And finally, she said that trying not to be alone in your situation is key – this is why coming along to AMSIG sessions can be so helpful.

Reference:

Anichich, E.M. (2017). The Psychology of Middle Power: Vertical Code-Switching, Role Conflict, and Behavioral Inhibition, *The Academy of Management Review*, retrieved from:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313739114_The_Psychology_of_Middle_Power_Vertical_Code-Switching_Role_Conflict_and_Behavioral_Inhibition