Making the Most of the Middle

Middle managers are often caught between the strategic and the tactical to deliver team performance and manage up. Now is an ideal time to turn these obstacles into opportunities.

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Staples Worklife Magazine

Staying productive while working from home. Rallying remote teams virtually. Keeping pace with shifting strategic priorities.

These are just a few of the many challenges that managers at all levels have faced as a result of the pandemic. The struggles are especially pronounced, however, for middle managers, who in good times and bad are expected to lead highly engaged teams even though they themselves might feel overworked or undervalued.

Although the pandemic presents new challenges, middle managers' plight is nothing new. Even the very name—"middle management"—can have negative connotations for many who occupy the role.

"The reason people don't like the idea of middle management is because of the word 'middle.' It's like being medium or average," says Nathan Jamail, executive coach and author of *Serve Up, Coach Down: Mastering the Middle and Both Sides of Leadership*. "We think of middle managers as being low ranking, low impact, low importance and easily replaceable."

More often than not, however, the opposite is true. No matter where they rank on the corporate ladder, middle managers are essential to business performance. "Middle managers play a significant role not only in helping to craft and perpetuate the culture of a company, but also in contributing to the bottom line," says Eric Anicich, assistant professor of management and organization at the USC Marshall School of Business.

Indeed, middle management can offer an opportunity to impact the organization—not to mention one's career, which can be greatly enhanced and advanced by the opportunity it affords to manage others while developing and demonstrating critical skills that could eventually lead to more senior positions.

That's especially true right now. In the face of rapid change, organizations affected by the pandemic are seeking future leaders who are as adept at change management, planning and problem solving as they are at leadership, communication and delegation. Because middle management is where such skills are born, now is the time for middle managers to recognize, harness and amplify their impact. Here are five strategies that can help prove that the middle is actually monumental.

1. Flip the script.

To be effective, middle managers must take advantage of the opportunities their role affords them instead of foxating on the stressors, Anicich says.

"It comes down to how you frame your role in the organization," he explains. "Middle managers occupy a crucial position in the organizational hierarchy because critical information flows through them. That can be stressful, but it can also be a source of power."

Because they're conduits for interests and information both above and below them, middle managers have the opportunity to facilitate relationships. "They can use their structural position to connect people who otherwise might not connect," Anicich says.

Imagine, for example, a CTO who has been tasked with conducting a security audit of a company's vendors to ensure they're being good stewards of its data. If the CTO is less familiar with cybersecurity, they may want IT associates to advise them—and who better to recommend resources than a middle manager in IT who is familiar with individual areas of expertise?

2. Be a mentor.

Middle managers have the opportunity to shape the people they lead, says Larry Sternberg, coauthor of *Managing to Make a Difference*. "When you're a middle manager, you're not just a cog in the machine," Sternberg says. "You have a team of people who are depending on you to be their leader, and that can be a very powerful thing."

Managers have a responsibility to recognize and cultivate their employees' gifts through training and mentoring, whether it's in person or virtual. And when they do, the entire team benefits from their increased contribution. Bonus: The results reflect well on the manager.

"Mentoring tends to have benefits in both directions—for both the mentor and the person being mentored," Anicich adds.

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3. Develop yourself.

Middle managers also need to focus on their own growth—especially since so many are thrust into the role.

"Becoming a middle manager is not always intentional," says executive coach Leila Bulling Towne of The Bulling Towne Group and Awesome Leader. "You get a job, you're doing great, and one day your boss says, 'Hey, you're a rock star—I'd love for you to lead a team.' The vast majority of people say yes because it's more money and a bigger title. All of a sudden they're managing people, and they never actually sat down to think about what they want or need from their work."

Middle managers who feel dissatisfied should have that conversation, Bulling Towne says. A manager at a software company, for example, might realize that she really loves coding. In addition to managing, she should look for special projects where she can contribute code and build that into her regular duties. Likewise, she should look for continuing education opportunities to maintain and improve her coding skills.

4. Make your superiors shine.

To thrive, middle managers must accept that their own success is dependent on their managers' satisfaction.

"Whether you agree with them or not, make your boss's priorities your own," suggests Sternberg, who adds that young professionals and seasoned workers alike can rise within organizations by adopting and advancing their superiors' agenda. "Your boss has an enormous impact on your career. No matter what generation a manager is in, making their priorities your own will serve you well."

Try a customer-service approach to dealing with senior executives. "When you have a customer, you find out what their needs are, what they really value, and you make it your business to deliver on those. You should do the same thing with your boss," he says.

Forget managing up, Jamail says. Instead, serve up.

"Serving up is not sucking up," he insists. "Sucking up is manipulating people with your words. Serving up is doing what's good for people. Your number-one job is to make your manager look good. If they give you direction you don't agree with, seek to understand it. And if they're wrong, fight to make it right— but do it to make them look good, not to prove them wrong."

Serving executives requires building strong relationships with them. "Learn about the person, not just the title," Bulling Towne advises.

Have coffee with senior leaders, make small talk with them before meetings and take notes about their interests and preferences that you can refer to later in conversations and correspondence. The goal is to determine what they want from your role and how you can be helpful to them.

5. Act like an executive.

If middle managers want to be treated like a senior leader—or perhaps even become one—a smart step is to behave like one.

"If I want to be promoted to senior leadership, one of the best things I can do is to understand what their attributes are," Bulling Towne says.

Middle managers can build their leadership brand by deciding how they want to be perceived in their organization, then being purposeful about developing and demonstrating those qualities.

For example, senior leaders are often solution-oriented. Instead of complaining about ill-conceived direction middle managers receive from above, approach these executives with thoughtful alternatives.

Senior leaders also drive engagement and strategic thinking. They tend to be visionary, says Ujwal Arkalgud, CEO of Motivfbase, an AI-powered consumer trends tool. He's observed that middle managers tend to be more tactical than strategic.

"Because of the way they're incentivized, middle managers are primarily concerned with achieving short-term gains," Arkalgud says. "They don't take a long-term view. As a result, there's a huge gap between where the organization needs to go and where middle managers focus."

Middle managers who find ways to align with the business's objectives can cultivate a reputation for being forward-thinking and, in so doing, increase their organizational influence.

"This type of middle manager takes risks," Arkalgud says, "but they're also the ones who are winning more."

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Top Traits

In a survey of more than 5,000 employees, The Predictive Index People Management Study identified what characterizes great (and terrible) managers.

Great Managers

1. Have a strong work ethic
2. Are honest
3. Have a sense of humor

Bad Managers

1. Don't communicate clear expectations
2. Play favorites
3. Don't show concern for employees' personal development

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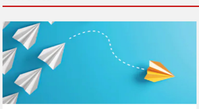

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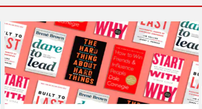

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