

Member's Quarterly

Summer 2019 Edition

Perspective

Thawing the 'Frozen Middle'

Conquer middle management malaise

A few years ago, a major accounting and consulting firm surveyed middle managers around the world. They found that 20 percent were dissatisfied with their current employer and another 20 percent were actively looking for another job. One of their pet peeves was a lack of prospect for advancement. They also felt that they were getting all their work done but not getting properly compensated. Many were frustrated trying to balance work and personal time. In short, the people in the middle of the organization, what some refer to as the glue that holds everything together, were not feeling the love from their employers. The consulting firm actually referred to them as the 'frozen middle', stuck between the employee and senior leadership groups.

If we were to do the same survey today, the results would be remarkably similar. That's definitely a problem since the senior executives rely on these sergeants to lead their troops into battle every day. How should organizations deal with the malaise in middle management? Consider ways to improve communications, increase direct engagement and acknowledgement, refocus middle managers towards performance goals that are linked to rewards and offer them a path to career progression. Then look at how middle managers can improve their own job satisfaction and increase their opportunities for continuing success.



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What the Organization Can Do

Acknowledgement

Senior managers play a crucial role in helping their middle managers feel appreciated and understood. When middle managers talk about feeling that their work is not recognized, they are specifically referring to their superiors. Senior managers must engage their middle managers so that they feel part of the decision making as well as the delivery. Middle managers deliver the messages they are given. If they are reminded that they are important and valued, they will pass that along to their work teams. Increasing their engagement and participation are vital to their personal and organizational success.

Performance Goals and Rewards

Middle managers also need to see where they fit into the strategic objectives of the organization. They need concrete objectives, examples and messages so that they understand their role and how it contributes to organizational success. There should be a recognition of this contribution through bonuses and incentives when applicable. Money alone does not drive most middle managers. They want to be treated fairly and to be recognized on a regular basis. Problems will arise when they see others getting an advantage or perk that they didn't receive. Inconsistency leads to dissatisfaction.

Career Progression

Organizations should always try to recruit their managers internally. Bringing in new people, especially at the executive level, can cause a great deal of frustration for middle managers. This sends the unintentional message that the people already here are not good enough which has a detrimental effect on the workplace. The answer is to do a combination of internal and external recruitment. Also, offer training, support and maybe even coaching to middle managers to let them be considered for higher level positions. Even if there are limited opportunities above them, there is always the possibility of a lateral transfer or job swap with a middle manager in another department. In some ways, it is not necessarily about the promotion itself but being considered for it that's important.

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Perspective continued

What the Middle Manager Can Do

Continue to Grow

There is a great opportunity in being a mid-level manager. It comes with a level of respect and responsibility that need to be honoured and cherished. Many are given these opportunities to see if they have the potential to move ahead in the organization. This only works if we work for it. The most successful middle managers are those who continue to learn and grow throughout the middle of their career. In some cases, that may be the highest step they reach on the corporate ladder but they will truly enjoy it.

Respect Those Above and Below

A middle manager must respect the people above and below them if they want to earn that respect for themselves. They are leaders and they are listened to and followed by the people below them. That makes what they say about those above them really important. If they speak badly of their superiors, these remarks make them look bad. Also, no matter how careful they are, those comments will find their way back to the senior executives. It is just as important to show those who report to them the respect they deserve as workers and contributors to the organization's success. These employees will work harder for their middle manager and that information will drift up to the senior execs as well. Good middle managers recognize that the people they pass on the way up may be the same people they may pass on the way down.

It's time to stop thinking of middle management as blockers to progress. Employers should harness their energy to lead to help their organizations grow.

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