



It Is Tough To Be A Middle Manager

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It is tough to be a middle manager. On the one hand, you are pulled by the centripetal force of senior management. This is the force that demands seamless and sometimes unquestioning execution of organizational strategy. It requires you to toe the company line, even when you believe the line is flawed. An outlet for those who have unsuccessfully tried to influence organizational direction is to exit the company. A more common but insidious alternative is to remain and become a mindless conveyor of decisions from the top.

On the other hand, you contend with the centrifugal pressures of frontline supervisors and employees who, in addition to typically wanting higher pay and better benefits, are opinionated about how work is performed and often resist unfamiliar systems, technologies, and processes. In the short term, pressures from this group are generally easier to manage as middle managers can assert their authority and use sanctions, or fear of sanctions, to gain compliance.

The dizzying pace of change in corporate entities further complicates the already difficult existence of the middle manager. Innovation, technology, and globalization are forcing companies to take unprecedented steps to stay afloat. As of June 2006 mergers and acquisitions were on track to top the record \$3.4 trillion set in 2000.¹ Business strategies are overhauled and thousands of jobs are reshuffled in the process. To ensure the organization that emerges remains nimble, concepts such as "flat organization" and "delayering," which essentially translate into reducing the size of middle management, are put to work.

Conversely, constant change presents a unique opportunity for middle management to reinforce its value to the organization. Middle managers are extremely instrumental in creating the agility that enables an organization to swiftly respond to its environment. No matter how many times the business plan changes, they are to elicit the support, commitment, and optimal performance of operational supervisors and personnel requisite to maintain a forward momentum.

If middle management distrusts those at the helm, that organization will struggle with trust issues. If it is misaligned with corporate strategy, the lower stratum of the organization will be out of kilter. If it does not communicate effectively, employees will make assumptions and fill in blanks. An organization experiencing any or all of these challenges cannot optimize its resources. It should not expect a highly satisfied workforce or maximum ROI. These consequences are especially acute in industries where speed is critical to success.

Middle managers must recognize that change management is an integral, inescapable part of their role. There are four critical ways that they can assert their role in managing change.

Communicator

Middle managers' role as communicators increases significantly when change is under way. First, they must seek clarity from the top on the nature and dimension of change. They must break down the communication in a manner that makes sense to the individual units they represent. Next, using multiple media and venues, they communicate the change in a clear, honest, and timely manner. To demonstrate respect and maintain credibility, relevant details, no matter how unappealing, are shared with the employees who will be impacted. Feedback must be collected and relayed to senior management. This exchange of information should occur at the speed of change. For instance, weekly meetings can become daily huddles to ensure effective communication.

CONDUIT

WHERE INFORMATION AND INNOVATION INTERSECT

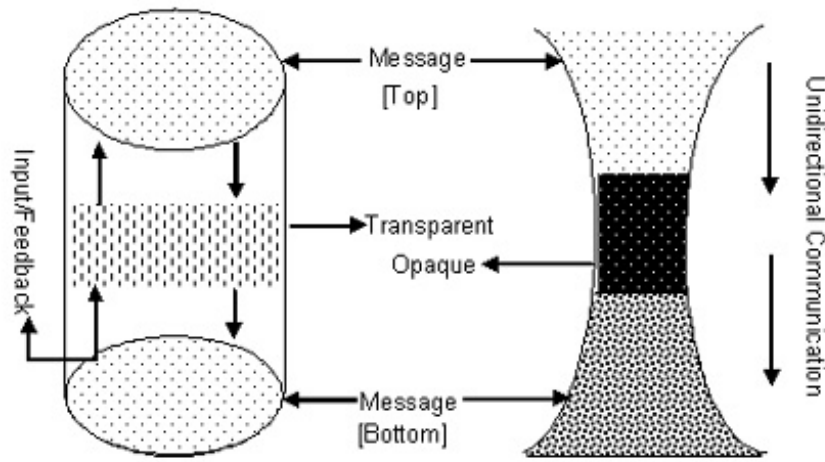


Figure 1. Effective Communication

Figure 2. Ineffective Communication

Figure 1 shows how middle management processes communication so that both ends of the organization receive the intended message. The similarity of the dots at the top and bottom indicates that the essence of a message is not lost in translation. The upward and downward arrows show that information flows both ways. The transparency of the middle depicts the realism that characterizes communication. Management demonstrates trust in organizational members by presenting facts in a timely, direct manner.

Figure 2 shows a distortion in the message that the bottom receives. This occurs for a number of reasons. Middle management may not have clarity on the scope of proposed change. It may not be communicating as quickly as necessary, thereby causing a glut of information, which can create confusion. As a control mechanism, it may choose to communicate bits and pieces, giving workers just enough information to complete specific assignments. Whatever the reason, poor communication causes operational upheavals and overtime erodes credibility.

Solicitor

It is not enough for middle management to relay information up and down the organization. It must cultivate the habit of soliciting employee opinion on important decisions that affect employees' work and/or compensation or that significantly impact the organization. Processes should be established for accessing opinions, and input should be articulated and presented to decision makers. Managers must close the loop by relaying decisions

to employees.

Intense change, especially when it occurs in quick succession, as being experienced by many organizations, can be particularly excruciating for rank-and-file employees. The employees' frustration is exacerbated when they are not given an opportunity to participate in decisions that affect them. As stakeholders and people who execute the mission of the organization, they feel disenfranchised and devalued.

Workers need to be especially on top of their game in times of change. They must be prepared to sharpen existing skills and acquire new ones. They juggle old and new ways of doing business while maintaining productivity expectations. When management forges ahead with change implementation without their input, it typically educes compliance, which is a focus by workers on meeting the minimum requirement to get by. Management should aim for commitment; that is, the sincere devotion and resolve of workers to do whatever it takes to ensure their organization is successful. Inclusion is a viable path to eliciting commitment.

This role is designated "solicitor" to underscore the fervor and sincerity that should characterize each request for input. When management appears obligated or insincere, or when it ignores input, it sends the message that employee opinion is not valued.



Builder

Business decisions are not always favorable to employee opinion. Market forces and government regulations, for instance, can force an organization to change the way it conducts business. In such circumstances, support from the workforce can be critical to successfully implementing change and attaining new heights.

To build broad support, management should first build a form of a guiding coalition.² This is a group of employees who have differentiated themselves as top performers and respected members of their teams. Through extensive dialogue on rationale and details of impending change, the coalition is given an opportunity to clarify objectives and identify potential flaws. Once convinced, it engages in a process of educating other employees to embrace change.

Management can choose not to spend the time and effort to educate employees on the rationale behind change initiatives. It can rely on formal authority to enforce decisions. However, experts agree that managers who tap into moral authority—that is, those who earn the trust and confidence of others by building and nurturing honest relationships—achieve better results.

Executor

Execution is performing work to achieve set goals. Vital to the survival of the organization, it is management's classic responsibility. The unrelenting storm of change has brought the discipline of execution into sharp focus. Status quo intervals (periods where strategy is on course and work flows in an established manner) have become shorter and organizations have become more flexible to cope.

In their critically acclaimed work *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done*, Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan identify several actions and behaviors that enable managers to excel at execution. Two of their recommendations are particularly relevant to effectively managing change.

A. Deep personal involvement. Bossidy and Charan make the point that setting strategy from the mountaintop is inadequate for getting things done in the most productivity way.⁴ Managers who feel exempt from the details of execution are reminiscent of the piano teacher who holds a music degree from a prestigious college and eloquently communicates the historical origin and theoretical underpinning of music but does not know how to play the piano. Thorough understanding of the mechanics of execution enables managers to ask the right questions, establish efficient processes, and make intelligent decisions, thereby building credibility with staff and ultimately achieving desired results.

B. Alignment. People, strategy, and operation must be aligned to accomplish goals. This entails positioning people where they can maximize their strengths, establishing a clear line of sight from the strategic plan to specific tasks and educating people on the strategy, and designing operational processes to enable people to successfully operationalize strategy. Depending on the pace of change, alignment can be an ongoing process with each assignment requiring a fine-tuning of strategy, resources, and/or processes.

Clearly, middle management plays a key role in enabling the organization to benefit from change. However, an unsupportive culture or senior management can inhibit its effectiveness. In addition, a few unwholesome tendencies come with being in the middle. Invisibility or passiveness is one of them. Punting blame or hiding behind tops or bottoms is another. Feeling powerless is yet another. To the degree that middle managers want to maximize their effectiveness, they will have to overcome inertia and challenge these obstacles.

References

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