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Building Block: Relationships

Life 'in the Middle' Often Misunderstood; Blaming, Disconnection Have Hidden Costs

Research shows that 50 percent of an employee's job satisfaction is attributed to the relationship with the immediate supervisor or manager. So, when retention and productivity issues surface, who's first in line for blame?

Studies also show that today's managers and supervisors have more direct reports than ever before. Too, a major concern of these folks in the middle is that they have insufficient influence or input on organization policies, procedures, client relationships, general decision-making or vision-creation. Yet they're charged with responsibility for the success of implementation.

Middles, as they've been called, are frustrated with the Tops, and the Tops feel Middles are out of touch with business demands. Fortunately, this is a dilemma just waiting to be addressed, and many solutions await.

A supervisor had a plaque on his wall that read, "The Middle Manager's Prayer." Underneath, a vulture says, "The middle manager doesn't have a prayer." One day the plaque was gone. "What happened?" was asked. "One of my vendors just got promoted. He'll need it now more than I do."

Middle managers often are the target of dismay from the senior staff, who believe middles are resistant to change, slow to adopt new methods, lack people skills to motivate their staff and don't fully comprehend the demands of today's business climate.

In their view, Middles see those at the top as not understanding how policies they create cause the business problems that hamper the organization's success. Middles see the Tops as out of touch with daily realities of what it really takes to get work done in the organization.

Continued

The mud slinging is as old as the org chart.

Gather Some Numbers Before exploring solutions, some data gathering is essential:

1. How often are managers and supervisors meeting with senior leaders to share information – The tops advising the Middles of marketplace shifts, customer desires and the financial situation of the organization. The Middles, in turn, are advising management of workers' concerns and mood, process issues, quality concerns and systems problems that, if addressed, would improve productivity, profitability and customer satisfaction.
2. Do middle managers feel they genuinely have the tools – time, materials, authority to do their jobs well?
3. Is the role of the middle manager clearly defined? Is it defined appropriately for the current marketplace demands?
4. Which decisions about policies and work processes are jointly created among the Tops and the Middles?
5. How often do Tops clearly, openly listen to the concerns of the Middles and facilitate resolution of key issues?

Beware! Here is where the defensive wall goes up – and fast. Senior managers, faced with these issues, tend to minimize the problems, shift the blame to the Middles and move into denial. Defensiveness is a natural, but troublesome response when long-standing difficulties are raised for discussion.

New Era Demands Greater Cohesion

Used to be, organizations regarded its layers – senior management, middle management, and line staff – as separate entities. Each had a role that appeared distinct and separate. Which worked fairly well in a simpler, local economy in which customers quietly (or with mild muttering) accepted what they were given.

Fast-forward one hundred years: Rapidly changing global marketplaces with more savvy and demanding customers and the technology to satisfy new whims have changed how organizations must respond.

Slow, lumbering organizations are doomed. Even the public sector has had to change; taxpayers are no longer patient with cumbersome systems, whether they're renewing their driver's license, purchasing a permit or seeking information.

Successful organizations are commanded to create alliances within their own walls in order to stay alive, much less grow.

Continued

Shred the Org Chart?

Perhaps the most eloquent writer on the subject of organizational “layers” is Barry Oshry, of Adelphi University, whose book, *Seeing Systems*, (San Francisco: Berrett-Kohler, 1996) provides clarity and insight into how these three groups see each other.

*"When we don't see systems, we fall out of the possibility of partnership with one another;
We misunderstand one another; . . .
We have our myths and prejudices about one another;
We hurt and destroy one another; . . .
All of this happens without awareness or choice."*

Effective organizations are creating platforms to build teamwork among the layers and, at best, to slow down the dissention.

What's needed are venues in which information can be shared, decisions made, strategies developed and collaborations seeded that bring the groups together to work in concert on critical business issues.

Suggestions in the organizationing checklist are aimed at changing the systems of who is in the room when decisions are made and actions are planned.

Checklist for Bridging Gaps Between Senior and Middle Managers and Staff

Building an Alliance Between Senior & Middle Managers

Representatives of both groups are in the room for:

- Strategic planning sessions
- Creating policies affecting employees
- Making decisions that affect how work gets done
- Discussion of customer requirements and shifts in the marketplace
- Decisions on how to strengthen customer relationships
- Decisions on how to support marketing/advertising activities

Building Stronger Customer Relationships

Senior and middle managers work jointly on:

- Determining the essential customer information for organization-wide dissemination to increase employee understanding of customer requirements
- Process changes required to improve response to customers
- Translating changes in the marketplace into organization business processes
- Ways to capture information from front-line customer-service staff

Continued

Helping Middle Managers Manage

To support middle managers in their key role... is the organization:

- Providing sufficient time for managers to meet with their staff?
- Offering skill-building opportunities for managers to enhance their abilities?
- Inviting managers to use different departmental meeting formats that optimize input from staff?
- Providing full support for process changes essential to getting work out and to customer satisfaction?
- Allowing middle managers to meet together as a group to build cross-functional alliances for improved interdepartmental communication and process functioning?

Retention Agenda

To shift the beliefs, look at changing structures. Begin bringing middle managers and senior leaders together on key issues.

One question to begin: What are the top two or three priorities for the organization to position itself to optimally move forward when the economic recovery occurs?

To gain maximum engagement of the joint efforts consider: What are our greatest organizational strengths? What are one or two key initiatives that would capitalize and expand those strengths to increase customer retention and increase business from current customers?

Quotable

Citing his research on middle managers, Quy Nguyen Huy (Harvard Business Review, Sept. 2001) notes four major areas the Middles contribute:

"First, middle managers often have value-adding entrepreneurial ideas that they are able and willing to realize – if only they can get a hearing. Second, they're far better than most senior executives are at leveraging the informal networks at an organization that make substantive, lasting change possible. Third, they stay attuned to employees' moods and emotional needs, thereby ensuring that the change momentum is maintained. And, finally, they manage the tension between continuity and change . . ."

**For more information contact
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