

Beleaguered middle managers are often our organizations' most valuable players

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Middle managers are often derided. Indeed, their prime value in some organizations is that they can be the first targets in a downsizing, easily eliminated because their impact is hidden and downplayed, if not mocked.

Who sends endless unnecessary emails? Who churns out pointless reports? Who blocks novel ideas? The office grapevine would mercilessly finger that unloved group.

“In fact, whenever something goes wrong at a company it’s easy to blame middle management,” McKinsey & Co. consultants Bill Schaninger, Bryan Hancock, and Emily Field write in *Power to the Middle*.

Their intention is to praise middle managers rather than bury them. Middle managers are the essential co-ordinators of our hierarchical institutions. They are a bridge between upper and lower ranks, translating strategy and, indeed, supporting good ideas raised from their team. The best of them are too valuable to be promoted to more senior positions. Their talent should be honoured with higher remuneration and status, but they should be kept in place. A job this important shouldn’t have the high turnover that is commonplace in many organizations.

“Shower them with bonuses,” the consultants argue. “Allow them more flexibility, give them the most desirable assignments, expand their influence or geographical range – whatever is most important to them, as long as they continue doing their important work.”

We often talk about how people don't leave organizations; they leave bad managers. But the consultants note the reverse is also true: People stay with, and are loyal to, their best managers.

Many other middle managers might similarly be coveted except their own bosses deny them the opportunity to make a difference. A recent McKinsey study found that on average middle managers are spending almost three-quarters of their time on tasks other than managing their teams. It appears that more than a quarter of their day goes to performing individual contributor work, rather than leading, coordinating, coaching and inspiring their team. About one day a week is devoted to administrative duties.

The three consultants spend their time advising the senior echelon in organizations on thorny problems. But time and time again, they have found, the organizational change required can't be achieved without the active involvement of middle managers. They are our most valuable players, yet are too often wasted.

In the survey, many said it was their responsibility to protect their teams from misguided and even toxic executives. They understand the value of training but can't get the buy-in and budget from above. They are beleaguered as well because they feel those senior leaders don't understand the details of a task or strategy, and too often expect the impossible. "They want their bosses to trust them to get things done and make changes in their own way, and that's how they get the trust of their team," the consultants write.

One middle manager in a pharmacy described the role as a babysitter. Another comparison is to a firefighter, always putting out fires. A Columbia University study, highlighting the pressure from above and below, leads to a punching bag metaphor. Add scapegoats: Too often they were forced to give orders based on decisions from above and then ending up taking the blame when things didn't work out.

The term middle suggests they are not all that important. But the consultants argue that as workplaces grapple with huge issues of change, middle managers will be pivotal. Work takes place at breakneck speed these days. Communication, while easier because of technology, is also overly abundant, complex and confusing.

Automation is transforming and eliminating jobs. Remote work has frayed the bonds in many teams.

“Middle managers will play a vital role in dealing with all of these shifts, and many others. They will serve as filters and translators between the executive suite and the front line. They will rethink and rebundle jobs as they shift large swaths of workers to new roles. And they will be the key to restoring the human connections that technology and the pandemic tore apart,” the consultants write.

But organizations have to recognize their role in people management and allow them the freedom to do their jobs to the fullest. That would allow them to improve productivity, boost retention, motivate staff and create a sense of purpose.

Organizations would benefit, the consultants feel, by a return to “management by walking around” that was common in the 1950s. That has to be updated, of course, to accommodate the modern-day complexities of technology and remote work. Middle managers will need to lead with compassion, asking employees in their walk-bys not just “how is the work going?” but “how are you doing?” That must come not by formula but from genuine curiosity. In turn, however, it can build loyalty.

Not all middle managers are superb, of course. Promotions of top-notch individual performers who lack people skills and coaching abilities has resulted in many who are subpar. It has also led to the negative stereotypes about middle managers. But it’s time to recognize the value of talented middle managers, coach and develop more of them, and give them the respect and support they need in their important role.

Cannonballs

- When giving a talk to employees, executive Joel Schwartzberg warns that more becomes less. Listeners need time to comprehend the ideas a speaker conveys. Delineate your “need to knows” versus your “neat to knows” and identify and remove redundant ideas.
- As individuals perceive themselves to have more power, they tend to become more optimistic, leading to unrealistic targets and inflated expectations, observe Cian McEnroe and David Rock of the NeuroLeadership Institute. This can lead to

being more “vision-focused” and less concerned with details, causing a disconnect with their direct reports who are doing the heavy lifting.

- Blogger Seth Godin notes that based on return on investment the most successful movie of all time is *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. “The lesson is simple, but ignored by most investors and entrepreneurs: The goal might not be to be the biggest. The goal might be to achieve your goals,” he says.

Harvey Schachter is a Kingston-based writer specializing in management issues. He, along with Sheelagh Whittaker, former CEO of both EDS Canada and Cancom, are the authors of When Harvey Didn't Meet Sheelagh: Emails on Leadership.

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