

Operations Management

The Ambiguity of the Middle Management Role

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There is certainly a great deal of uncertainty, confusion and very often frustration at executive level regarding the effectiveness of the middle manager. Many executives are dissatisfied with their middle managers and are questioning the value of this position within the organisation. Some executives are actually blaming middle managers for holding back the organisation from achieving its full potential. This ambiguity about the role is not only confined at executive level as many middle managers themselves are unsure of the jobs key tasks and more importantly what is required from them within the role.

One thing is certain this ambiguity is causing a great deal of concern and cost within organisations. So what do middle managers actually do and more importantly what are they meant to achieve within an organisation?

Differences – Middle Manager vs. Line Manager role

Everybody would agree that the middle manager job is very different from that of a line manager one but what are the differences?

- **Semi-executive role** - the middle manager role is certainly a senior management position and salary and benefits packages confirm this. When a line manager takes on a middle management role they actually move away from the coalface and more towards the boardroom which means they have to act and behave as a company executive would do so at all times. This also means that they have to support the organisation and its strategy even if they do not like the direction the organisation is going. Unfortunately there are many middle managers who have not been able to step away from the line management team.
- **Managers of managers** - middle managers do not manage 'people'

they manage line managers, line managers manage the 'people'. They are certainly accountable for the performance of their people but they do this indirectly through the line management team. Middle managers are often responsible for huge teams and cannot possibly manage the individual performance of all team members but they can manage the performance and development of the line managers. If they do this effectively line managers will automatically manage the performance of their people effectively.

- **Dependent on the achievements of others** - many middle managers do not actually achieve anything individually, nearly all their results are achieved through their line managers. Which means they are dependent on the results of others rather than their own direct contribution.
- **Dependant on many others for support** - Middle managers tend to need support from others in the achievement of their goals and objectives whereas line managers tend to require little support in theirs. Middle managers tend to have a team of support personnel and a network of HQ contacts in order to help them do the job. This means Middle Managers have to be effective in the fostering of good relations and communication links with supporting functions if they are going to be effective in the middle management role.
- **No clear set of duties** - unlike the disciplined, process and procedures based line management job the middle manager does not have a clear set of duties and procedures to work to. Middle managers tend to work towards clear targets and objectives but it is very much up to the middle managers themselves to decide what to do and when to do it

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“Middle Management is 80% Leadership 20% Management”

“The primary job of Middle Management is to implement company strategy”

in the achievement of these objectives.

- **Leadership vs. management**
The most fundamental difference between line manager and middle manager roles is to do with Leadership vs. Management. Management is all about keeping the wheels turning, maintaining a control and organising, that is what line managers do. Leadership is about developing, improving and driving through necessary change and that is precisely what middle managers have to do!
The people side of line management involves 80% management 20% leadership whereas the people side of the middle management role involves 80% leadership & 20% management. Unfortunately many middle managers today were promoted on their management skills rather than their leadership abilities.

What do Middle Managers do?

In a nutshell; **Middle managers implement company strategy** rather than decide company strategy. Middle managers tend not to get too involved in defining company strategy but they do have to work out how to achieve the strategic requirements of the company. What that means is that if an organisation wants to achieve X middle managers have to find a way of achieving X, middle managers are basically implementers rather than strategists.

With regards to what they actually do, you can break the middle manager's task requirements into three task areas. **Technical** tasks; administration, day-to-day routines, compliance checking, **People** tasks; leading, motivating and developing and **Strategic** tasks; financial management, report writing, analysis and strategic communication such as involvement in the HQ projects and boardroom discussions. All executives would agree that the primary role of the middle manager falls under

The **People** category (leading, motivating and developing). The challenge for executives today though is ensuring that the amount of time middle managers spend on each of these task areas is proportioned to the requirements of the business. If executives give middle managers too many administration tasks to complete (checklists, reports etc) or if they give them too many strategic tasks to complete of (attendance at meetings, financial analysis) they may turn the middle manager into auditors/administrators or strategists/accountants respectively. Many middle managers were appointed because of their technical expertise or their understanding of financial statistics, unfortunately very few middle managers today were appointed because of their people skills and leadership qualities. Leadership is certainly hard work, complicated, uncomfortable and very often risky so many middle managers choose the technical and strategic tasks over the leadership requirements of the job because it is much easier, much safer and they can see the results of their personal efforts much quicker.

What are the competencies of Middle Management?

There have always been a great deal of differing opinion regarding middle manager competencies but in nearly all cases leadership is viewed as a key competency. Leadership however is not a single competence, leadership is made up of a number of specific competencies each of which are critical to be middle manager role. The key competencies of the middle management role are:

- **A strong commercial focus -** Middle managers must keep costs and profits uppermost, they must be able to recognize business opportunities and consider the financial implications of the decisions they make.

Key competencies of Middle Management:

- *A strong commercial focus*
- *Desire for continuous improvement*
- *Decision-making*
- *Developing the management team*
- *Understanding the need to empower*
- *Visioning*
- *Innovation and creativity*
- *Intellectual capacity*
- *Managing change*
- *Delight in diversity*
- *Managing uncertainty*
- *Performance Management*
- *Personal effectiveness*
- *Self development and learning*
- *Understanding the culture*
- *Influencing others*
- *Achieving a balanced lifestyle*

- **Self development and learning** - there is very little training for the middle management role and being thrown in at the deep end to either sink or swim is common therefore middle managers need to be effective self-developers.
- **Personal effectiveness** - middle managers need to be effective in managing both their own time and workload and the workload of their line managers so they need to be able to set goals effectively on a short, medium and long-term basis and achieve them as a matter of course.
- **Management team development** - middle managers have to have the ability to identify development needs in the line management team and provide suitable opportunities to meet those needs for them to develop. Middle managers need to be able to delegate tasks and challenges to their line managers in order to develop them.
- **Performance management** - middle managers have to manage the performance of the line managers which means appraisal, developmental reviews, giving performance feedback and setting clear goals for improvement is a critical requirement of the role.
- **A desire for continuous improvement** – seeking more efficient and profitable ways of doing things, actively encouraging ideas for improvement from others is a key requirement of the middle management role.
- **Managing change** - middle managers need to be change agents, drive through necessary change in a positive manner and accept change as an every day part of the middle management role.

What are the key skills of Middle Management?

Middle managers need to be skilled in every aspect of management and leadership there are very few skills that middle managers do not use at one time or other. The critical skill requirement of all middle managers falls under the leadership competence of **Performance Management**.

- **Management by objectives** - Middle managers have to be exceptionally skilled in setting objectives and following through to completion. The only possible way middle managers can manage line manager performance and very often at a distance is by setting clear measurable objectives and holding managers to account for achieving them.
- **Training and coaching** - middle managers have a huge influence on line manager performance and development. There is no better development for line management then to receive effective training and coaching from the middle manager. The requirement for middle managers to coach and train their line managers has never been as critical as it is today. Middle managers need to be the consummate trainer and coach if they are to achieve competence at line management level.
- **Communicating assertively** - there is no doubt that middle managers need to be able to communicate effectively in order to drive through necessary change or improve performance. Presenting, explaining and persuading are all skills that need to be learnt. The most critical of the many communication skills for middle management is undoubtedly **assertiveness**. Dealing with confrontational issues is a regular requirement of the middle manager job therefore middle managers need to have a full understanding of

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assertiveness techniques and be skilled in their use. What makes communicating assertively so important is the influencing effect a middle manager can have on the line managers. If a middle manager takes a passive or aggressive approach to dealing with confrontation many line managers will follow this as the lead.

- **Poor performance management** - Middle managers need to be skilled in the managing of ‘manager’ poor performance and poor behaviour. Many middle managers are ineffective in this area because of the lack of specific training on the subject. If middle managers are ineffective in dealing with poor performing line managers then you can be sure line managers will be ineffective in dealing with poor performing employees.

Talent management - identifying talent, finding the next generation managers is a critical requirement of the middle manager’s job. Having a robust succession planning strategy in place is key to the future success of an organisation. Recruiting the right people and developing talent takes great skill.

How do you manage Middle Manager performance and effectiveness?

In the management of middle managers it is far easier and clearer to assess the effectiveness of a middle manager by what they **achieve** rather than what **they do**. Executives need to set middle managers clear targets and objectives and then **hold them to account for achieving them**. This is the only effective way of managing middle manager performance. Obviously middle manager technical and strategic targets and objectives will differ between industries however middle manager ‘people’ objectives tend to be similar. Every middle manager needs to:

- Monitor company values and ensure they are being adhered to at all times by all employees.
- Ensure all managers and employees perform to the required standard.
- Monitor company policies and procedures in the workplace and ensure they are being implemented at all times.
- Ensure all employees (including managers) are given the appropriate training to do the job.
- Develop a culture where regular attendance is expected rather than irregular attendance is being accepted.
- Have in place a succession planning strategy where Talent is identified and then developed.

The truly effective middle manager will work towards achieving these objectives with little encouragement or direction however the more technical/strategic minded middle managers will often need a great deal of encouragement in the achievement of them.

Technical/strategic minded middle managers are effective in maintaining the status quo but can be ineffective in moving businesses forward.

How do you measure Middle Manager competence?

Objectives manage manager performance but it is key performance Indicators (KPIs) that will measure middle manager effectiveness. Hard KPIs such as financial targets do not always give a clear picture of middle manager competence. Many ‘not so good’ middle managers (and line managers) regularly achieve financial expectations ‘despite’ them rather than ‘because’ of them. Soft KPI such as department; productivity, absence, staff turnover, skills audits and culture surveys all work well in measuring middle manager effectiveness. A simple measure of middle manager competence is to assess the competence of the line managers within the middle manager’s team. The plain fact is; competent middle managers

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have few under-performing line managers and incompetent middle managers tend to have many. If an organisation has poor performing line managers and nothing or very little is being done about it, that is a clear sign of middle managers incompetence.

Appointing Middle Managers from line management positions.

Identifying line managers with potential for middle management is no easy task as executives can normally only assess a line manager's 'management' skills rather than their leader potential. The key questions to ask when considering appointing a line manager to a middle management role is:

With development would this line manager be willing and able to:

- Swim (self develop) if thrown in at the deep end?
- Represent the company professionally as an executive?
- Maximise on the full profit potential of the function/department they will be responsible for?
- Find good people for the organisation?
- Coach and train line managers when required to do so?
- Tackle and resolve an under-performing line manager issue?
- Identify improvement and development areas within the team/department?
- Identify and drive through necessary change?
- Motivate, influence and inspire a line management team?

Most importantly – Is this line manager's values in line with the values and beliefs of the key people within the organisation (Culture)? If they are not, this middle manager will develop a sub-culture different and possibly damaging to that of the organisation. Many people believe that managers recruit in their own image, what actually happens is they unconsciously (sometimes consciously) recruit people with similar values.

Improving or Removing the under-performing Middle Manager

The UK has many under-performing middle managers in industry today (Hay report 2007) and improving the performance of middle managers is proving to be a challenging matter. Many organisations have removed this level of management because of its ineffectiveness only to experience a decrease in line manager performance as a result. Middle managers require development in Leadership competencies, more so than executives. Executives have a strategic leadership responsibility; middle managers have a team leadership responsibility which is far more challenging and required far more specialist development. When an organisation grows to an extent where middle managers are necessary 'improving' is actually far more effective and less costly than 'removing' the role.

Like them or hate them middle managers are necessary in every medium to large organisation. So appoint carefully, give newly appointed middle managers the right training, continually develop your seasoned middle managers and manage and monitor their effectiveness with clear objectives and softer KPI. Do this and middle managers will see company strategy is implemented effectively even they will moan a great deal whilst doing it.

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