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Magic in the middle 'Making it happen'

Managers spend around 75% of their time in discussions, according to Donald Sull of London Business School. But, they don't always know which are the right things to discuss.

Execution requires 4 types of conversation, and most managers are better at some types than others.

1. Making sense in rapidly changing and uncertain times.
2. Deciding what to do, what to stop, or what not to do.
3. Gaining commitment to action and monitoring progress.
4. Deciding on and making strategic and tactical correction as required.

Sull warns that managers who excel in one type of discussion may battle to employ alternative modes of conversation.

Professional background secures promotion but often proves inadequate for general management. Hoping that additional skills will come from 'on the job' experience alone, as many do, is a risky (and lengthy) approach.

We know this level of management is challenged - so how good are available 'role models'? Some measure of luck plays a role in any strategy - but it's pretty risky to have luck as your only strategy.

Middle managers are seriously challenged and need carefully crafted development support to avoid mediocrity or, worse still, meltdown.

MELTING IN THE MIDDLE: MID-LEVEL MANAGERS IN CRISIS

Signs of trouble in the middle

With the worst of the GFC apparently over, everyone is hoping for a solid economic recovery. However, large organisations are concerned about sustaining and improving performance, and the state of middle-management is a key factor.

In a March 2010 study published by the Human Capital Institute (HCI), only 14% of the respondents (senior HR leaders) felt their middle managers were fully engaged. The GFC, we might be tempted to think. We'd be right to assume that the GFC has had a major impact on middle management. But we'd be mistaken if we thought the problem started with the GFC.

In fact a Mercer study in March 2008 found that nearly 50% of middle managers surveyed said they were seriously considering leaving their organization. Despite the vital strategic role that middle managers play, they also reported being much less committed to their organisations than senior management.

Can't live with them, can't live without them

But, it's not just middle managers who are aggrieved. A Hay report from 2007 estimated that underperforming middle managers were costing UK companies £200b a year. 38% of directors surveyed felt that ineffective middle managers were paralysing their organisations. 40% saw them as the single biggest threat to achieving organisational objectives.

And that's where it gets really interesting (and scary!). Fast forward to April 2010. London School of Economics professor, Leslie Willcocks, sees middle managers as the glue holding organisations together in today's complex global business environment. She warns that companies who see middle managers as dispensable are likely to run into serious problems.

More training, right? Wrong!

Given their key roles and the concerns, you'd expect that mid-level managers would be receiving plenty of support. You'd be wrong! The recurring echo over the years is that many middle managers are under-skilled for the job **and** that development opportunities have been inadequate.

Senior managers in the Hay study said it took new middle managers on average 7 months to get up to speed, more than double the 3 months expected. But 68% also acknowledged a lack of appropriate training, and 54% of the middle managers felt that this affected their performance. On average, British middle managers hadn't participated in formal training for 17 months.

The 2010 HCI research acknowledges that middle management has been the "forgotten layer" in terms

of overall L&D spend. 69% of the HR execs surveyed wanted to spend more on mid-level managers. However, they admitted that generally *they have been unable to develop offerings that their mid-level people find effective*. In fact, less than 10% felt their development offerings for middle managers were seen as effective by those end-users. Is HR complicit in the middle level melt-down?

A key challenge for middle managers

The GFC has savaged middle managers. If they didn't join the ranks of the unemployed, they had to do much more with much less. The HCI reports that this increased manager stress was also transmitted downwards to front-line people. Ultimately, this resulted in reduced productivity and even more stress for the middle manager. This downward 'spiral of gloom' became increasingly bleak and severe for all affected.

Now that things appear to be improving, companies are hiring again. But middle managers ranks aren't swelling proportionally - bosses are waiting for the upturn that can only come from translating company strategy into outcomes. Ironically, mid-level managers are needed to make this happen.

Where are they struggling?

Middle managers have identified four vital challenges. **Strategic execution** (or making it happen) is by far the single largest challenge. This clearly highlights the key role that middle managers play in translating organisational strategy into deliverables. If they're not taking care of it, who is?

The second ranking challenge is **change management**. Given that research estimates between 40% and 70% of change fails in some way, we should be doubly concerned about developing these skills. A small investment in upskilling seems astute, and might also be a cost-effective insurance policy given the cost of most change projects.

Next, middle managers recognise the challenge of **motivating and developing** their people. After all, becoming a middle manager usually means moving away from technical expertise towards getting things done through others. Many middle managers under pressure don't do a great job at engaging their people, giving rise to the type of negative comment that the middle ranks are *obstacles* rather than *levers* for progress and prosperity.

Finally, middle managers identified that **leading boldly** in the current complex and trying conditions is challenging, and rightly so.

Does your organisation rate as *winning* or *wanting*? Close to mid-level meltdown? Middle managers fully engaged? Will you retain the best as things improve? How are you supporting them to thrive?