

How to Support Middle Managers



BASED ON CULTURE BITES EPISODE 150 BY DOMINIC GOURLEY OF HUMAN SYNERGISTICS NEW ZEALAND AND CORINNE CANTER PUBLISHED ON OCT 12 2021. WRITTEN BY CHRISTINE SCUSSEL, HUMAN SYNERGISTICS INTERCONNECT GMBH

Being a middle manager can be one of the trickiest positions in any organization. On the one hand, they are expected to operationalize strategy, organize, coordinate, make sure that strategies, plans and objectives are being implemented and executed – with often less resources than they would actually need and less autonomy and flexibility than their leaders have. They need to manage up and to filter and translate down for their teams. On the other hand, they have to deal with day to day people and operational issues. While the executive team (and also the level below) often show Constructive behaviors, middle management might show rather Defensive tendencies. Expectations are high and with a high focus on leadership, the crucial role of managers often seems like leaderships “poor cousin”. The “meat-in-the-sandwich” position, which has also been come to be called the “frozen middle” due to its resistance to change is often maligned and misunderstood.

To understand how middle managers can be helped in their difficult, demanding role that is often harshly judged, we need to first look at how change is typically brought about in an organization. When change initiatives are on the horizon, for middle managers it can often feel like change is done to them rather than with them and they can be perceived as not taking ownership or taking the initiative. Culture and leadership development often focus on the senior level – maybe including level -1 or -2 depending on the size of the organization. Middle managers are left tired and frozen as a lot of change that was decided on is simply dropped on them. This crucial group that actually knows what is going on day to day is often not asked what they think and not brought on board early in the change process. This may lead to some resistance - and understandably so. A way to mobilize middle managers can be to get them involved in change initiatives as early as possible to actually help them own what they will later implement. Often middle managers are seen as blockers to change when they raise issues regarding logistics or implementation, whereas when leaders get them on board early and really listen to what they say, managers can be the ones setting the initiative up for success as possible stumbling blocks will be anticipated and addressed upfront.

What would an environment that helps middle managers be successful and motivated look like then? Managers need to be given ownership - instead of hearing complaints how they are not taking it. They are accountable for delivering and executing with some constraints as many initiatives are characterized by a lack of time, resources or autonomy on the managers' side. A great opportunity in culture work lies in showing middle managers that culture initiatives are actually not adding to their task list, but instead to think differently about how they do what they have on their list. It's about getting them to focus on their current objectives and how they are delivering them, instead of feeling overwhelmed and zoning out when it comes to culture change. Culture is about how work is being conducted and education and involvement around how things are done can help middle management see culture work as a benefit. It is important to ask managers to do what is realistic, especially in setting the timelines. They also need to be involved in setting their own goals and to have objectives that they can actually impact. It is crucial to measure success on indicators that they can control instead of indicators that are market dependent which they don't have any control over.

One way to achieve this in practice is to ask managers the question Would things be easier if your people just did this? Well, the answer was a unison YES. Of course, it would take the pressure off of managers if their people want to do their jobs, without pushing. Middle managers need to understand not only the What and the Why but also the How to leverage this to their benefit: to save time, get better results, motivate people and share responsibility instead of carrying it all on their shoulders.

Sometimes managers argue that their leaders need to sort themselves out first to give them clear instructions on what to do and that conflicts at the top are passed on to be resolved in the middle– and, yes, in some cases and to a certain extent this may be true. However, we could challenge this argument, as in many situations in life, it is important to consider what one can do instead of waiting for others to act. Shifting the responsibility to other people disempowers you so instead it is much wiser to focus on what you can control and influence. Each and every one of us is in control of one thing: Our behavior and small changes in that behavior can make a big difference and go a long way.

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Pressure on middle management has increased over the years, as this role has undergone some change. It used to be a learning stage, before one would move on into more senior positions. Now, however, as hierarchies have gotten flatter, resulting in broader responsibilities and a wider span of control, it is not an exception that middle managers have a large number of people reporting to them. The question organizations need to ask themselves, is how middle managers can be supported in terms of learning and development. The development described above has had the effect, that management skills such as resource allocation, managing goals and change and coordinating were often overlooked and less developed. Teaching managers to do these things in a Constructive way will be a very powerful lever in moving towards a more Constructive culture. Management training fell a bit by the wayside while we went straight into leadership. However, if managers are taught this fundamental skillset it will help them be a good leader at a later stage and it can also be a way to provide managers with training even when the budget is tight and pricy one-on-one coaching is not an option. When climbing into leadership positions, management skills can help to truly lead, instead of still managing the day to day business.

Developing a leader means developing their behavior and to create an awareness of the impact they are having. This can be done effectively with the help of tools such as Life Styles Inventory™ (LSI), which can also be used with a group of leaders to help them understand practical application, or Leadership/Impact® (L/I) or Management/Impact® (M/I). To show them their impact, it is important to help them learn a new skillset, new habits and leadership routines. Skills can be linked to the message that would be sent culturally which is often the missing piece in culture work – and the reason why we have a “frozen middle”. Organizations that are successful in culture change mainly do three things:

1. Really build this level of leadership underpinned by self-awareness understanding how my thinking shapes how I show up.
2. Practical skill building training that would take people to another level from a cultural perspective.
3. Revise their systems and processes in the light of this new awareness. This is often where change is started but without the awareness you get a different product than if you do this work after leaders are more aware.

Are you interested in learning more about how the self-reflection of managers and leaders can be increased? We are looking forward to hearing from you: info@humansynergistics.de.