



LEADING

Middle managers: Why the hardest job just got harder

by Randall S. Peterson



The manager squeeze: middle managers have always faced pressure from above and below. As demands multiply, organisations need to rethink how they support them.

Middle management has always been one of the toughest jobs in an organisation, and it is getting tougher.

Managers have had to navigate the demands of the people above them while dealing with the reality facing the people below. What has changed is the number and complexity of those demands.

Businesses have more stakeholders to answer to, more information to process and more expectations about how they should behave, all while operating in an environment that has become harder to predict.

Some of this pressure starts at the very top. Boards, facing more uncertainty themselves, are asking executives for more detail and reassurance. The result, in some organisations, is that leaders spend a disproportionate amount of their time answering questions for the board rather than actually leading the business.

That same dynamic – more people wanting more from the people running things, in an environment that keeps generating more questions than answers – runs right through the business.

For middle managers, much of that complexity arrives from both directions. Senior leaders want answers, information and delivery. Employees have their own needs and expectations, while customers, investors and regulators each want different things. None of those demands is necessarily unreasonable. The problem is trying to satisfy them at the same time.

That is where the manager squeeze begins.

More people want more things

Many of these tensions are as old as business itself. Customers want better products at lower prices while investors want the company to make more money. Managers have always had to make trade-offs between the two. What has changed is the number of interests they are now expected to take into account.

It is easy to criticise managers in the public sector for facing an unwieldy number of stakeholders – running a public service like the NHS, for instance, means answering to patients, government, unions and the public all at once.

But the stakeholder landscape for private businesses has become considerably more complicated too. Employees expect organisations to take their wellbeing seriously. Regulation has become more demanding in many industries. Boards and senior leaders want more information, while businesses are also expected to think about their wider impact on society and behave responsibly without losing sight of growth and profitability.

Listening to those different perspectives matters. An organisation cannot understand a complicated environment by simply cutting through the noise and ignoring what different groups are telling it. But the more information it takes in, the more questions it raises. The result is a greater cognitive load throughout management with more information to absorb, more competing interests to weigh and more decisions to make.

That pressure is particularly acute in the middle of the organisation, where decisions made at the top have to confront the reality of putting them into practice.

When policy meets practice

Senior leaders can set a strategy, introduce a policy or define the behaviours they expect from employees. But there is inevitably a distance between deciding what an organisation should do and making it happen.

Organisational researchers call one version of this decoupling: a formal policy exists at the top, but what happens further down the organisation looks quite different. Historically, some degree of decoupling could even be useful, allowing people closer to the work the flexibility to respond to circumstances that senior leaders could not anticipate.

Digital technology might have been expected to narrow that gap. Organisations can now see much more of what is happening inside their businesses, while regulators and other stakeholders can scrutinise them more closely. Yet decoupling has not disappeared. In fact, it can increase when more and more requirements are pushed down from the top without enough time being spent understanding what implementation actually involves.

People closer to the work may understand perfectly well why a particular policy will not have the intended impact, but that information does not necessarily travel back up the organisation. Somewhere along the way, it gets stuck. The middle manager is then left trying to reconcile the expectation coming from above with the practical reality below.

That tension is not new. What is new is the sheer number of things managers are now being asked to reconcile. And when the policies coming from the top do not match the behaviours being rewarded in practice, the job becomes harder again.

When values meet reality

Most organisations spend considerable time thinking about values and behaviours. Senior leaders may genuinely believe in them. The real difficulty comes when those values run into somebody who gets results.

The problem is that this calculation only counts the performance of one person. If 50 or 100 other people have to work around somebody who intimidates them, causes them to disengage or makes it harder for them to perform, their lost productivity has to be counted too. Once that wider effect is included, the supposedly high-performing bully can turn out to be a significant net negative.

There is also a longer-term effect on the organisation. People notice who succeeds and how they behave. If somebody is repeatedly rewarded despite acting in ways that contradict the stated culture, others learn that this is an acceptable way to get things done. The behaviour starts to spread.

That leaves managers in an awkward position. They may be expected to uphold a set of values that they can see are not being applied consistently above them. The gap between policy and practice is no longer an abstract organisational problem; it becomes something they have to manage every day.

Organisations that are serious about culture therefore have to be prepared to act when somebody consistently violates it, even when that person delivers in the short term. Otherwise, the decision not to act will send a stronger message than anything written in a set of corporate values.

The cost of the squeeze

When managers spend too long navigating these competing demands, there is a human cost. Sustained pressure takes a toll, and eventually some people leave.

But organisations should not think about the manager squeeze only as a wellbeing issue. There is a business cost as well, and turnover is one place where it becomes visible. There is rarely a shortage of people who want to be promoted, so it can be tempting to assume that a management vacancy is easily solved. Someone leaves and somebody else takes the job.

That overlooks what happens around the transition. A manager who is exhausted may spend a period operating below their best before eventually leaving. Knowledge and relationships disappear with them, other people have to cover the work, and senior managers have to spend time finding and developing a replacement.

If this happens repeatedly, the important question is not whether an organisation can fill its management roles. It is why it has to keep filling them. Turnover can tell senior leaders a great deal about the health of an organisation and, eventually, the cost of the squeeze shows up in performance.

Making management manageable

There is no obvious way to make the world less complicated. Nor can organisations simply stop listening to regulators, employees, customers or investors because responding to all of them is difficult. Listening to different stakeholders is increasingly important when the environment itself is uncertain.

What organisations can change is what happens after they listen.

Information needs to travel in both directions. If demands move easily down an organisation while information about why they will not work struggles to move back up, managers in the middle are left trying to make the two fit together. Listening to people closer to the work does not mean doing everything they want. It means understanding the reality in which a decision will have to work before making it.

Managers also need enough clarity to make decisions when there is no obvious answer. This is where values, behaviours and organisational culture become important. They can give people a framework for navigating competing demands, but only when the organisation is prepared to apply them consistently. A high performer who repeatedly violates those expectations cannot always be treated as a special case simply because they deliver.

Organisational research describes the idea of optimal distinctiveness: people want to feel that they belong, while also knowing that their individual contribution has value. One way to picture it is as a yellow tulip in a field of red tulips – recognisably part of the group, but still a little different.

Creating that combination of belonging and individual value is part of good management. Organisations should also ask whether they are creating those conditions for the managers expected to provide them.

Many organisations already recognise that there is a problem. The harder part is doing something about it while responding to the same short-term pressures from investors, customers and other stakeholders that helped create the squeeze in the first place.

Middle managers have always had to deal with pressure from above and below. That is part of the job. But organisations cannot keep increasing the number of demands managers are expected to reconcile without thinking just as carefully about the conditions in which they are being asked to do it.

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