

Leading from the middle

The journey from middle management to middle leadership

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We easily use sport metaphors to talk about leadership and team spirit. But these don't fit everyday life of middle managers. Yes they play ball. But their ball, team members, adversaries, referees, field, rules, supporters change continuously. It's not easy to score in such a game...

The three questions we address in this white paper are:

- 1) How exactly is the game changing for middle managers?*
- 2) How can they score better in that changing game?*
- 3) And how can they develop their scoring ability?*

The overall idea is that future proof middle managers need to develop a leadership identity.

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1. Middle managers: dynamo's or dinosaurs in your organisation?

Research is ambivalent about the future of middle managers. "New technology itself has become the great general manager," writes Lynda Gratton (2011, p. 36). She's leading an international research consortium on the 'future of work'. **She announces the end of middle managers:** "Gen Y workers see no value in reporting to someone who simply keeps track of what they do, when much of that can be done by themselves, their peers, or a machine. What they do value is mentoring and coaching from someone they respect." (p. 36)

She's not alone with her prediction. Drucker stated in 1988 that "whole layers of management neither make decisions nor lead. Their main role is to serve as relays. Information-based organisations threaten that." (in Dopson & Stewart, 1990, p. 5). Thomas and Linstead (2002, p. 72) conclude that "predictions over the future of middle management are profoundly pessimistic". Dopson and Stewart traced already in 1990 these kind of pessimistic views back to 1958: information technology reduces the role of middle managers.

This view on the future of middle managers is confirmed by the rather gloomy testimonials from middle managers themselves: " ... a frustrated, disillusioned individual caught in the middle of a hierarchy, impotent and with no real hope for career progression" (Dopson & Stewart, 1990, p.3). **"They get lost** in the recurring reorganisations and pressure to overwork and 'presenteeism'." (Thomas & Linstead, 2002, p. 89). Boston Consulting Group (2010) reports that the decline in engagement during the financial crisis was most dramatic among middle managers. They don't feel recognized. Accenture (2007) reports similar findings .

Middle managers seem to have become endangered species. They are dinosaurs, not fit for the volatile business world of today, and squeezed by demanding superiors & employees. Their superiors are frustrated because they "are not proactive", "don't find their voice" (Sims, 2003, p. 1196). Middle managers are seen as the "frozen middle": they block strategic changes (Accenture, 2007).

Other researchers have a **more optimistic view** on the impact of technology on middle management and announce a revival: "new technologies will release middle managers from their traditional coordinating functions to take new challenges" (Polakoff, 1987 in Dopson & Stewart, 1990, p. 8). "Middle managers are agents for changing the organisation's 'self-renewal process' because they are able to eliminate the 'noise fluctuation and chaos within an organization'." (Nonaka, 1988 in Dopson & Stewart, 1990, p. 8). Shi, Markoczy and Dess (2009) state that the role is increasingly important because formal structure, specializations and occupational subcultures create structural holes in the organization.

“Why Middle Managers May Be the Most Important People in Your Company?”

states Wharton professor Ethan Mollick (2011). He examined the role of middle managers in the gaming industry during the last 12 years and found out that it was the middle managers that made the difference in firm performance. Other research confirms. More horizontal structures increases the importance of MM in achieving competitive advantage (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1994; Currie & Procter, 2005; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Kanter, 1982). Also Boston Consulting Group (2010) and Accenture (2007) acknowledge the need for stronger middle management.

Is middle management becoming obsolete or more important? Should an organization disinvest or invest in middle management? The answer is clear: the role of the middle manager is transforming. The classic role of the middle manager who translates strategy in actionable objectives no longer fits reality. Middle managers with this mindset will add less and less value and become more and more frustrated. Middle managers who adapt to their changing role could well become highly valued dynamos in their organisations. In the next part we examine what this role and mindset could be.

2. Leading from the middle: future proof middle managers.

“The distinguishing feature of middle management is not where they sit in the organization chart. What makes them unique is their access to top management coupled with their knowledge of operations. This enables them to function as mediators between the organization’s strategy and day-to-day activities” (Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd, 2008, p. 1192). **Tying strategy to operations is the essence of being middle manager.**

This is not only done by merely downward implementing strategy in today’s more entrepreneurial, flatter and knowledge-intensive organisations are multiple. Middle managers need also to influence upward, to integrate horizontally and to engage in divergent initiatives. Wooldridge et al. (2008) among others plot these different roles on two dimensions: integration versus diverging and upward versus downward. This leads to four different roles (fig. 1).

First of all middle managers are strategy implementors. Secondly they can reinforce strategy management as upward information synthesizers. This integrative role in two directions is important for organizational performance (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997). Middle managers can thirdly be facilitators of adaptability by organizing experiments without too much implication for the top. Finally, successful experiments can be championed upward. This is their fourth role. The two diverging roles, championing alternatives and facilitating adaptability, are particularly important for companies with a strategy of innovation (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997).

The multiplicity of these roles explains the complexity of the middle management position. Strategically active middle managers have to juggle with different hats. This is not without risks and especially top management needs to recognize and enable the full strategic potential of the different middle management roles. If not, middle managers risk labels as “spin doctors”, who always distort information, “drones” who only think execution, “politicians” who always lobby for their pet projects or “subversives” who undermine continuously strategy implementation (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1996). This is unfortunate as involving middle managers in strategy formation leads to better organizational outcomes (Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990; Kuratko & Goldsby, 2004; Meyer, 2006; Sillince & Mueller, 2007; Mantere, 2008; Conway & Monks, 2011; Huy, 2011).

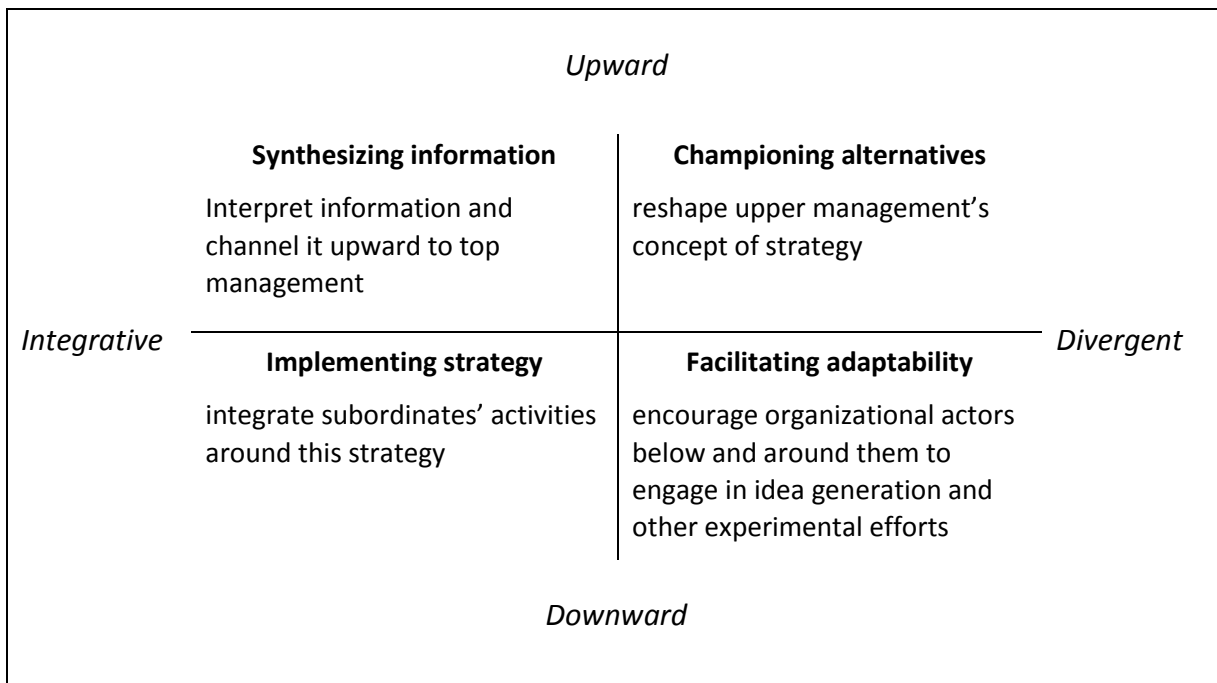


Figure 1: middle managers have 4 strategic roles (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1994; Wooldridge, et al., 2008)

This brings us to the topic of leadership in two ways. First of all, leadership is a social process of claiming and granting (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Middle managers can claim leadership in their organisation, but if it’s not granted to them, their claim is without result. Secondly, the middle manager has to become self-authoring in his role. He needs to develop his own plot or as Wouter De Geest (2011), CEO BASF Antwerpen, says: “I want my managers to develop their own story.” Middle leaders are not only target of influence, they are also actors of social change. Leadership from the middle doesn’t have a function description.

Future proof middle managers become middle leaders. They understand that they have multiple roles to play in multiple groups and networks and they have developed their own vision and identity in this complexity: “I’m in charge, I’m the boss, and I have multiple stakeholders to manage.” This identity allows them to be flexible without having the feeling of being torn apart. This different identity also needs different skills: overall emotional balancing and self-regulation (Huy, 2002), issue selling to the top or political skills (Dutton et al. 1997; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Ren & Guo, 2011) and transformational leadership behaviours (Stoker, 2006). Effective middle managers have informal power, are versatile, volunteer early, criticize positively and are emotionally intelligent (Huy, 2001; Huy, 2011).

Now that we have defined the role and profile of the future proof middle leader and the need to adopt a leadership mindset, the only question that remains is how to develop this?

3. How to become a middle leader?

“Which leadership book or training can you recommend me? How can I become a middle leader?” These simple questions require very complex answers if you consider all dimensions of leadership. Day, Harrison and Halpin (2009) advocate an integrative model of leadership development with three levels. The first, visible level targets skills. Leadership is a question of expertise. Theory and training can help to acquire the right skills and knowledge for the right roles. Middle leaders learn to develop their social capital, influence their stakeholders and lead in a transformational way.

The second level is less visible and targets identity changes. Leadership is a question of ‘being’. The degree and the way one sees oneself as leader determines the leadership behavior. It’s not because someone is trained to tell stories in a convincing way, that that person develops his own story. It’s not because someone is told to empower his employees in an inspiring way, that that person increases his personal power. Conscious identity development is what accelerates leadership development (Day et al., 2009).

Identity develops by planned reflection, positive experiences, feedback and support (Day et al, 2009). During leadership workshops, we create identity workspaces (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010) by asking middle managers to draw or express their position in the organisation. We explore their biography and connect the dots between defining moments in their life and look for the relationship with their leadership DNA. We analyse and challenge their implicit leadership theories. We let them project their leadership future and construct in this way “provisional and potential leader selves” (Ibarra, 1999) which they in turn can further develop. All these exercises aim at self-in-context awareness fuelled by peer coaching, feedback and continuous reflection.

The last level of development described by Day et al. (2009) is adult development. Kegan and Lahey (2010) define three qualitatively different levels. “Socialized minds” are team players and try to live up to the expectations and definitions of their environment. “Self-authoring” people are on the next level and have their own compass. They make choices on personal basis. Their identity is a coherent whole of personal values and beliefs. They can take full ownership and learn to lead. The “self-transforming mind” is the final stage, as they see the limits of any belief system, hold inner contradictions and tensions without trying to ‘solve them’. Their self is no longer dependent on one clear identity. They lead to learn.

Adults develop during their life span different identities, capacity for critical thinking, self-regulation and moral judgment in a never-ending process of disintegration and integration (Day et al., 2009). We all develop our “ABC”, while fulfilling our duties and taking on responsibilities. Without disturbing events or experiences our ABC becomes stronger and stronger. Others discover at a certain moment that their “ABC” doesn’t work anymore, e.g. by a personal tragedy or a very tough assignment. These people live the disintegration of their “ABC” and can develop a “DEF”. This transformation needs support and safety, e.g. in the form of trust, mentoring, coaching and a development culture.

Leadership develops against this broader background. As organizations need more and more middle managers to develop their “ABC” into a “DEF”, they need to design transformational experiences and provide proactively support and safety to accompany them on this journey. This also means that they have to take into account the developmental readiness of people and to create a context for personal and life long adult development.

4. Conclusion

Own unpublished research shows that only 8 out of 69 open leadership programs in Belgium and The Netherlands target explicitly the tactical middle management level in organisations. HR people typically pay less attention to the stable performing experienced middle managers in their people review. They tend to focus their attention on ‘potentials’ and high or low performers (Accenture, 2007). Middle managers are an unserved audience in terms of development.

And yet, their importance is growing as organisations need to adapt and deal with dynamic complexity. Empowered middle leaders, with the right skill set and above all, a leader mindset can become catalysts for innovation and renewal in their organisation. The middle may well become the right place to be in postmodern organisations.

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