

THOUGHT
PAPER

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF THE MIDDLE

Why your middle and frontline managers are more important than ever - and how to make sure they succeed

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Middle and frontline managers matter. They look after 80 percent of your workforce. They're often closest to your customers. And they're the ones who get things done: translating corporate strategy into actionable tasks, engaging your people and making change stick.

But the past decade has seen dramatic changes to the way organizations work. They've had to become more responsive to keep up with an increasingly sophisticated customer base, and as a result have dramatically changed their internal structures. And they've had to adapt to operating in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment. All of which has made the role of a middle or frontline manager more challenging than ever.

At Korn Ferry Hay Group, we're passionate about the vital role these managers play in organizations. And we think that senior HR and business leaders could do more to get the most out of them.

Here, we share some ideas for how to do it.

INVESTING IN YOUR MIDDLE AND FRONTLINE MANAGERS MAKES GOOD BUSINESS SENSE: OVER A 10-YEAR PERIOD, THE ORGANIZATIONS WE RATED BEST AT DEVELOPING THEIR LEADERS ACHIEVED MORE THAN TWICE THE SHAREHOLDER RETURNS OF THEIR PEERS.

Research by Hay Group, Best Companies for Leadership, 2013

WHAT'S CHANGED AND WHY

The world of the middle and frontline manager has changed almost beyond recognition.

Ten years ago, these people were likely to be heading up intact teams within one function, and networking mainly with other people in that function. Their main role was to translate the organization's long-term strategy into targets for their team, then manage the people in that team to achieve them.

That meant acting as a conduit for messages from the top of the organization to their team. And it meant spending a lot of time on traditional management activities, such as coaching and mentoring, to make sure their people delivered what they were meant to.

The manager's own performance was measured on 'process' goals, such as

how well the team performed against its targets. Analytical skills were very sought-after. And job security and a decent pension was motivation enough for most people to perform.

Now, life's very different. Factors such as digitization, M&A and doing 'more for less' have transformed the workplace. Customers have become more sophisticated and demanding. And organizations have become flatter, leaner and more 'matrixed'.

To stay ahead of the competition, they also need to innovate and adapt constantly. So three-to-five year plans have become a thing of the past – and change has become a constant.

IN A RECENT POLL OF HR LEADERS AND SPECIALISTS, 46 PERCENT SAID THAT THEIR MIDDLE MANAGER ROLES AREN'T REALLY (OR AT ALL) DESIGNED TO ENABLE MANAGERS TO PERFORM TO THE STANDARD THAT THE ORGANIZATION NEEDS.

Combined results from two Korn Ferry Hay Group webinar polls (total of 82 respondents)

A SHIFT IN PERSPECTIVE

What does this mean for middle and frontline managers? Well, their main focus has moved from internal (supporting team members to perform) to external (giving the customers what they want and need). The teams they now manage – and have to motivate – consist of a mixture of generations, as well as contractors, permanent employees and part-timers. Those teams are dispersed across the country, if not the world. And each person in them expects something different from the organization – as well as a quicker pace of management.

This means that 'modern' middle and frontline managers need to keep up with the expectations of both customers and colleagues. So they need to be able to

respond in the moment. And they need to make decisions they sometimes have to go back on later, because they hadn't had the time to really think things through.

On top of all this, they have to influence and engage a much wider network of colleagues, over whom they have no control. And they have to be permanently 'on' – monitoring social media and checking emails 24/7.

No wonder so many middle and frontline managers feel overwhelmed. But senior managers aren't happy either, and often tell us that their middle managers aren't performing as well as they'd like. So what's going wrong?



43%

of organizations identify 'being clear on the roles and responsibilities of middle managers' as one of their top challenges*

WHAT 'MODERN' MIDDLE MANAGERS NEED TO SUCCEED

A dramatically different business environment requires a dramatically different set of behaviors and skills. In our view, the main ones are:

Emotional intelligence. We've long known that EI is twice as important as IQ in predicting outstanding employee performance. But the changing business environment has brought EI to the fore. Managers now need to understand, empathize and engage with a disparate range of people, move rapidly between decisions and positions and call upon all manner of leadership, self-management and listening skills. All of which demand high levels of emotional literacy.

The ability to work across boundaries. To keep up with changing customer needs, organizations have tended to spread their activities across units and functions. This means that middle and frontline managers need to look more widely – even outside of their organization – for examples of best practice. And they need to be able to work with and influence people far beyond their immediate team.

Ego maturity. Being a successful middle or frontline manager is about letting go of the concept of personal power or success in favor of what's best for the team and the customer. And it's about being mature enough to manage the pace without getting caught up in it personally

and having an emotional response (a tough call, when change is a constant). But this kind of maturity doesn't develop naturally with age and experience. It's something you need to work with your middle managers to develop – whatever their age and stage. It's hard work, but it'll help them to move from being individual contributors to effective team leaders.

Connecting the dots. In these complex and fast-moving environments, it's more important than ever that managers recognize the bigger picture. That means seeing what's going on above and around them, as well as on the front line, and joining it all up for the team. Conceptual skills are the key here. They allow people to understand and solve problems by thinking creatively, identifying patterns and dealing with underlying issues in an open and exploratory way – not just thinking analytically. But even senior leaders can struggle to develop them.

Creating a clear and compelling vision for the team. Understanding what's going on is one thing. Identifying and communicating the thread between the organization's goals, and the team's role in delivering them, is another. Good managers use storytelling on a day-to-day basis because it's their job to create this vision for their teams in a way that's clear and pragmatic, but also engaging and motivating.

FIVE WAYS TO GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR MIDDLE AND FRONTLINE MANAGERS

So we know the skills and behaviors this group needs to succeed. Here are five ways you can help to develop them.

- 1. Be clear on roles and responsibilities.** Make sure your middle and frontline managers' jobs reflect the structure and goals of your organization. (Sometimes the jobs stay the same but senior leaders expect more from the individuals in them, for example.) Be clear and transparent about the role that those managers – and their teams – have in delivering your organization's strategy. And offer training, coaching and mentoring to help them to do it. Relevant role models will help, too.
- 2. Plan for how you'll identify and develop the right people to fill these roles.** Every organization will need something different from their middle and frontline managers. Assess what's right for you and make a plan for how you can get the right people in the pipeline to deliver it. And don't just look to your current high performers: they may not have what it takes to excel as leaders. Look instead for the skills and behaviors you know they'll need, and plan for how you'll develop those if they're missing.
- 3. Manage and incentivize your middle managers differently.** Forget setting annual targets and process KPIs; it's more important now that your managers can connect the dots and translate strategy. So change their KPIs to reflect the skills and behaviors you're looking for, such as being able to work across boundaries, innovate for customers and act quickly. And make sure you base them on outcomes, such as customer satisfaction. Then support your middle managers with relevant learning and development – but empower them to look after this themselves.

We know that learning in bite-sized chunks to fit around work, and making good use of technology, helps busy people learn on the go. Virtual classroom training is a great example of this, and works especially well if your people are in different locations.

- 4. Spend more time managing the transition.** What's made someone succeed before isn't necessarily what's going to make them successful as a manager. But we see people struggling to shift their self-image from what defined them in their old job – being an expert in their field, for example – to what will define them in the new one: getting great performance out of other people.

To make this transition easier, help your middle and frontline managers to work out how this role is different from what they were doing before – and what they need to stop, start and keep doing as a result. Then focus on developing the skills and behaviors they'll need to be effective in today's challenging business world: things like influencing, emotional literacy and the conceptual skills to connect the dots for their teams.

Experiential learning (where people learn by doing) can be a good way of building these skills. Take emotional literacy: by bringing emotions to the surface, managers get to understand their triggers, then develop techniques for managing them effectively. Developing this and other important skills will give new middle and frontline managers a solid base on which to build – both in this job and beyond.

- 5. Encourage people to take measured risks.** Even organizations that have undergone substantial change can be wary of giving managers the freedom to act in the best interests of the customer and the business. Allowing people to take sensible risks means giving them the scope to adapt readily to reflect what's happening in the market, the economy and with customers. By empowering middle managers to make these decisions, you'll help to engage and motivate them, as well as shift their focus from internal to external.

IN A RECENT POLL OF HR LEADERS AND SPECIALISTS, 'EMOTIONAL LITERACY' CAME TOP IN THE SKILLS MIDDLE MANAGERS NEED TO SUCCEED.

Combined results from two Korn Ferry Hay Group webinar polls (total of 75 respondents)

THE LAST WORD

Following all this advice will take time, effort and money. But your middle and frontline managers are the beating heart of your organization. So it's an investment that's critical to your future success.

Our leadership development courses combine everything we've learnt about great leadership with up-to-the-minute delivery methods.

We've designed the programs so people learn first, then develop through practice – and keep up the good work afterwards. So you'll get changes that stick.

To find out more, get in touch with your local Korn Ferry Hay Group office.

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HayGroup®

We believe that it's people who make change happen. So, while we operate on a global scale, we keep the individual at the very center of our thinking.

We're world-sized: 4,000 employees, 86 offices, 49 countries. We draw on management data from over 125 national centers. We work alongside more than 8,000 organizations in the private, public and not-for-profit sectors, across every major industry, in virtually every corner of the earth.

We're focused: on people – who they are, why they do what they do, and how they can be inspired and enabled to perform better at every level. Confident of the knowledge and methods we've originated over 70 years in business, we remain enthusiastic about new ideas that prove their worth.

We transform: we help managers to become leaders, and leaders to perfect their skills. Because when people are at their best, your strategic vision is ready to grow into business reality.

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