

Unleash the power of middle managers



Only if the potential of middle managers is unleashed, companies can hope to weather the current storm

Customers today are asking for more for less demanding enterprises to create value without resource augmentation.

All rational (strategic) steps have been or are being taken to

- Cut non-customer facing cost
- Shed the under-performing flab
- Raise the bar for individual performance
- Make quality processes more stringent
- Re-design roles to include customer-facing responsibilities
- Increase daily working hours in an endeavor to re-assure the customer with more value for less.

And yet, somewhere, notwithstanding all the strategic measures that are being taken, on-floor performance does not seem to have shown significant and consistent enhancement.

Most are wishing that there was some way by which we could augment the efficiency of people across board to return exponential performance. Just as one would do with machines in an assembly line! Unfortunately, we are dealing with human 'machines' whose efficiency cannot be increased through any

strategic process change. And fortunately, because they are human being, it IS possible.

By empowering the line managers to draw higher than realized contribution from their members

Although people are assumed to be rational creatures, generally speaking, uncertainties (which have come to stay as an expected element of our existence) bring out the emotional side in most of us. Part of navigating such uncertainties successfully is responding sensitively to these emotional reactions. Our experience indicates that this responsibility falls most heavily on the shoulders of those managing at the middle - those mid-fielders who are supposed to be the game makers - who for the most part, are ill-prepared and ill-equipped to deal with members' non-rational responses to change.

The position in the middle

The very position of those managing at the middle is very much like the coaches at the middle, on the hump, of a train going over hill. The engine at the front pulls in one direction with its 'positional' power while the sheer mass of the coaches

behind pull them back. And unlike the engine, these coaches are not 'powered'. Neither are they differentiated in terms of their worth from the mass of coaches trailing them. No wonder, they seem to be languishing in a self-imposed sense of powerlessness and worthlessness.

Ten toxic traits

When we look at this crisis at the middle in organizations across the industries, there are ten toxic traits that seem to be plaguing most of these middle managers. Often collectively termed as lack of ownership and initiative, these are:

1. Inability / reluctance to absorb and articulate the enterprise direction and align the rest of the enterprise, to the same.
2. Reluctance to provide timely & unbiased feedback to team members and deliver the "inconvenient facts", leading to speculations and a toxic team environment.
3. Loosing control of emotions, blaming, complaining and unnecessary escalating, leading to sub-optimal utilization of mid-management bandwidth and unnecessary choking of senior management bandwidth.
4. False agreement and buy-in on management decisions, leading to not taking accountability.
5. Reluctance to confront and push-back when required leading to taking on unwanted pressure and passing the same on to the team.
6. Inability to influence and attempting to convince, leading to lack of involvement amongst team members.
7. Feeling shackled and not taking initiative to intervene when required, leading to higher incidence of critical issues.
8. Resorting to short term fixes rather than complete resolution, leading to issues being postponed and a higher cost of resolution and rework.
9. Reluctance to question status quo and be more creative in make their roles more integrated with their selves, leading to lack of responsibility.
10. Resistance to change, leading to lack of responsiveness, adaptation and learn ability.

Recommendations

None of the above toxic traits is a skill issue. All skilling / competency development program will go to waste unless we bring in interventions at two levels:

Systemic

1. By having an engine at the back and leading these middle managers from behind relieving them significantly from tug they need to positionally carry.
2. By strengthening the inter-coach linkages through enterprise wide open dialoging initiatives, the coaches in



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the middle will be under reduced pressure to hold on to the mass of trailing coaches.

3. Loosening up the role definition to provide room for role making and thus creating a differential impact.

Individual

This is a classical example of conditioned self-defeating beliefs guiding one's behavior in an environment of stretch. To enable the middle managers come out of the clutches of such acquired beliefs, it is recommended that they are

- led to explore and become aware of their inner blocks to taking initiatives, making choices, responding to stimuli and influencing others
- made to become aware of the assumed position of powerlessness and worthlessness that they are operating from
- facilitated to accept their vulnerabilities and gullibilities to imbibe wholesomeness and integrity and
- accompanied to discover and leverage their very purpose of existence (to find a meaning in what they do), unleash their personal power (to eliminate the dependency on positional power) and make their roles driven by values and powered by intent (to be more self-initiated and self-managed).

This 'tilling of the ground' will not only make it more fertile for the seeds of innate leadership to sprout but will also release a lot of energy in the system for them to move forward from their current reality to the preferred future.

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