



It's a Tough Time for Middle Managers. Here's How to Make Their Lives Easier.

Description

All jobs have their good points and their moments of challenge. To me, one of the most challenging roles of all is done by those who work in middle management. A middle manager is not in the senior role and not in the hourly role. They are sandwiched in between and are expected to meet the needs of both groups. As discussed in this column [a few years ago](#), the best organizations tend to be those with great middle management teams. These individuals provide direct leadership to most of the workforce. They play a vital role in everything from creating the right culture, to attracting and retaining great talent, to helping people navigate change, to bringing out the best in employees.

None of this has ever been easy. But the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath have made the role of a middle manager even more complex. They are tasked with finding good people in a staff shortage; dealing with complex scheduling issues with team members who are virtual, in-person, or hybrid; unraveling supply chain issues; and in general navigating a tough financial situation. It can feel overwhelming. Middle managers really want to do a good job. We need to do all we can to make their lives easier.

I am so fortunate to have the opportunity to meet with many people who lead others. And one thing I consistently find is that most people who are in a supervisory role came into their supervisory role in a serendipitous way. When I speak in healthcare settings, I ask the attendees what they went to school for or what job they first started in. Typically, a person who is in a nurse manager role will say they went to school to become a nurse. I will ask, "Did you attend nursing school with the idea it is a stepping stone to being a nurse manager?" The answer is almost always, "No, I went to school to be able to provide care to people."

Often one receives their first role in management due to their supervisor leaving. Because they are an excellent worker, they are offered the role. They may accept it for a variety of reasons: they are a team player and don't want to let the organization down; or they feel good that the organization offered them a role in management; or their coworkers encourage them to accept the job; and so forth.

Many times, due to the speed of filling the role, their first title may have the word "interim" associated with it. When I ask a group at a workshop how many people's first job in management

was as an interim, many hands go up. I then ask how much development in management they received. The answers vary widely.

Yet even when training is provided, making this transition isn't easy. Being in a supervisory position is much different from doing the job the person had previously. Moving from being someone who worked in the accounting department or facilities to supervising others who work in accounting or facilities is a huge role change. The day-to-day reality is very different, even if the person was in that same department.

It is urgent that we prioritize giving middle managers the training and ongoing support they need to be successful in their role. At the same time, we need to be sensitive to the increased pressures they are feeling in the post-COVID era.

Here are some tips.

Assure managers they aren't to blame for people leaving. With the Great Resignation, this phrase can echo in a manager's mind: "People don't leave their job; they leave their boss." This statement can be demoralizing, and I don't agree with it. When I say it is most often not true, I usually get applause. Yes, there are times that it is correct. However, people can leave for many reasons. Make sure your managers know you realize this.

Less is okay. The pandemic has changed lots of things. These days, about 25 percent of people in frontline management have less than three years' experience in management. They have been drinking out of a firehose. Let them know it is okay to take a step back.

In 1993, the organization I was at began rounding on employees. Back then it was simple. Leaders would ask, "Do you have what you need today on the job? Who can I recognize?" It worked. But somehow the concept has grown to encompass many questions, documenting software, and a tendency to be more about frequency than quality. What could be transformational and relationship-building has become transactional and all about quantity. Whether we're rounding on customers or patients or employees, all we really need to say is, "We want you to receive excellent care or service or a great work experience. How are we doing?"

By reducing the questions, we are making the activity doable. We are putting the manager in a win situation. Too many questions and too much complexity can leave a manager feeling depleted. The goal of senior leaders is to replenish people.

Focus on bite-size development. Middle managers often feel overwhelmed. Yes, investing in skill development is critical, but don't put too much on their plate. I call this the N=1 approach. Each person is an individual. Work on one skill at a time, based on the manager's need. I have created a tool that will help with this. Click [here](#) to access the tool.

In addition to having managers work on one skill at a time, shorten or make the steps bite-size. I recently conducted a session for a large group of physicians on effective meeting management. Effective meetings not only help manage time, they facilitate getting things done. While there is always much to do, there are tactics to help promote efficiency. Getting agendas out 24 hours before meetings and having all attendees rate meetings at the end on a 1-10 scale are doable and will improve the meetings.

Show appreciation. Let managers know they are appreciated. Ask them if you are providing what they need. Ask them what you can do to be helpful.

Much of what I write and speak about is geared to helping people in the middle. My book *The Busy Leader's Handbook* is written to provide managers with micro-learning on best practices to fit common situations. I am grateful to work with people who have such a huge impact on the companies they serve and all the lives they touch.

Thank you to all of you who work in the middle. You make a difference.

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