



RESPONSIBILITY FOCUS

MEETING IN THE MIDDLE OR LEADING FROM THE MIDDLE?

Recognising the value of middle management in responsible leadership

Who are 'the middle' of an organisation, and how can they contribute to a more responsible business? The answer varies, depending on an organisation's structure and where individuals sit within it. However, understanding the potential of middle managers can unlock valuable insights, resources and influence that foster both ethical leadership and sustainable growth.

In some sectors, such as the military, leadership is not confined to senior ranks. The Army equips all recruits with leadership training, ensuring that those in the middle are empowered to act decisively. Missions clearly communicate what needs to be achieved and why, but the *how* is left to individuals and teams, creating a sense of ownership and accountability.

In contrast, traditional business models have often positioned middle managers solely as executors of top-down strategy. However, responsible businesses are shifting towards more inclusive approaches, recognising that middle managers play a critical role in shaping and refining strategy. These leaders have a unique vantage point—they are close enough to understand frontline realities and sufficiently connected to the leadership team to influence strategic decisions.

Empowering the middle for responsible business practices

Middle managers often possess a holistic understanding of organisational dynamics, from strategic goals to operational challenges. They have first-hand knowledge of customer needs and the agility to make meaningful improvements. Yet, in many organisations, their potential is constrained by rigid hierarchies and bureaucratic decision-making processes. This not only delays responses to external changes but also stifles innovation and employee engagement but middle managers risk becoming a buffer between leadership and frontline staff, diminishing the flow of vital information. When leadership seeks to understand customer sentiment, bypassing middle management in favour of direct frontline engagement can result in missed opportunities to leverage the strategic insight held by middle managers.

Six strategies for harnessing the potential of the middle

1. **Listen actively and consistently**

Responsible businesses create structured opportunities for middle managers to contribute to strategic discussions. Active listening involves more than just hearing - it requires engaging with feedback, acting on insight and fostering an open dialogue about the organisation's direction.

2. **Collaborate, don't compete**

Rather than viewing middle managers as obstacles, forward-thinking organisations harness their influence to drive positive outcomes. By collaborating with middle management, businesses can achieve more effective strategy execution and stronger team alignment.

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3. Grant autonomy to encourage ownership

Empowering middle managers with decision-making authority fosters responsibility and accountability. With their deep operational insight, they are often better equipped to respond quickly to emerging challenges, driving both ethical and efficient decision-making.

4. Reimagine the role of the middle

Consider re-framing middle management as a platform for innovation. This could involve decentralising decision-making through agile clusters or missions, where employees self-select roles that align with their skills and interests. Such models not only improve engagement but also create a more dynamic and purpose-driven organisation.

5. Provide time for strategic thinking

Overloaded schedules and constant meetings can inhibit creative problem-solving. Responsible organisations carve out dedicated time for middle managers to reflect, innovate, and collaborate. Structured time for strategic thinking leads to better decision-making and long-term value creation.

6. Support wellbeing proactively

Employee wellbeing is a cornerstone of responsible business. While frontline staff often receive significant attention, middle managers - who are instrumental in shaping both employee experience and customer outcome - are frequently overlooked. Proactively addressing their wellbeing through tailored support programmes can enhance morale, reduce burnout and ultimately improve business performance.

CONCLUSION

A Win-Win Approach

Middle managers often have the clearest view of reality but lack the voice or influence to act on their insights. By recognising their value, listening to their perspectives, and equipping them with the tools and autonomy to succeed, organisations not only enhance the wellbeing of their people but also build more ethical, resilient and responsive businesses.

Creating conditions in which middle managers can thrive is a hallmark of responsible leadership, and it's not just beneficial for them, it's good for the entire organisation.

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