

This Is All Dilbert's Fault

“Love the idea. However, how about *not* using the term ‘middle manager?’ It’s kind of cringey.” While writing this book, that was the most common type of feedback I received. So many people had thoughts about the term “middle manager.” Why does this term often generate a fingernails-on-chalkboard kind of response? You might have experienced something happening inside you as you read the prologue and introduction. Maybe a mixture of distain and anxiety that caused a sudden bout of eye-rolling, or even an impetuous urge to throw this book across the room. If so, I totally understand. And I’m grateful that you either resisted the urge to throw the book or you walked over and picked it up again. Good on you.

As a teacher and author, I’m intrigued by responses like this. Why is calling someone a middle manager borderline offensive? Why does no one proudly display “Middle Manager” in their LinkedIn profile?

In this chapter, I’ll explore those questions and show you why this negative view of middle management is a relatively recent development. You’ve heard it said that middle management is a season that *breaks* you, but I’m here to tell you that it’s a season that *makes* you. You can’t become

the professional, the leader, and – yes, I’ll say it – the person you’re meant to be without going through this season. I know it’s hard. But within the hardship is a hidden opportunity. And by opportunity, I don’t mean a chance “embrace the suck” or develop a “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” mentality. The opportunity middle management gives you isn’t a veiled form of some crazy workout routine or a strict diet. No, it’s the opportunity to upgrade your approach to work in a way that pays real dividends.

Like Your Parents, Middle Management Used to Be Cool

Do you remember the first time you saw a photo of your parents on their wedding day? My parents kept a framed photo from their wedding day on their dresser. Every time I looked at it, I was shocked. They looked so young. So happy. So . . . normal. Maybe all the stories they’ve been telling me about how popular they were in high school were true? Maybe they did, in fact, used to be cool? It’s a strange thing to realize that the people you’ve only known as “mom” and “dad” were once the life of the party, full of big dreams and late nights. They weren’t always the responsible grown-ups reminding you to turn off the lights and flush the toilet.

Middle management is similar. It too used to be young, hip, cool, and . . . normal. Middle management’s roots can be traced back to the late 1850s in what F.W. Taylor called “The Functional Supervisor.”¹ According to Taylor, the middle manager’s role was primarily about control and execution. A manager’s job was simply to make sure the right

process was followed, and everything was done on time. As organizational life evolved, so did the idea of middle management. The role quickly moved from efficiency enforcer to team overseer. Managers were responsible for problem-solving, relationship building, influencing, and communicating. Said another way, what started as a primarily technical role turned into a supervisory role. They were not responsible for doing the work, but rather responsible for making sure the team was doing the work.

I witnessed a classic middle manager while I was in college. After my sophomore year, I took a seven-month internship at Walt Disney World as part of their college program. I was an accounting clerk on a team called revenue control, which at the time was part of the accounting department. Our team was responsible for entering non-cash transactions into the accounting system. As a college student, I found that everything about this job felt important. I had to show up on time. I worked with adults. I learned how to use a ten-key calculator. I wore a tie every day. I was a briefcase and mortgage away from officially turning into my dad. The job was certainly not as exciting as working in the parks, but the job was indoors. If you've ever been to Orlando in the summer, you know that's a good thing.

The entire seven months while working in revenue control, I never one time saw the department manager doing the actual work. I saw him facilitate our daily departmental meetings, I saw him walk around the cubicle farm checking in on everyone, and I saw him go upstairs for important meetings with his boss. But I never saw him enter

noncash transactions into the general ledger. That is not a critique; it's just an observation. For decades, that's what middle managers did. They supervised those doing the work. This manager wasn't lazy; he was *crushing* his job.

For most of the twentieth century, middle manager as *supervisor* was the dominant model. This wasn't just a stepping stone or a box on the org chart; it was a respected, necessary role that held organizations together. In some ways, it was a reward for doing the actual work really well. You were such an expert that you no longer had to do the work; you just had to make sure the work was getting done.

All of this began to change in the 1990s. As technology advanced, communication became more direct, profit margins were being squeezed, and the perceived need for a human bridge between executives and frontline employees who only supervised started to fade. What was once a vital supervisory role was viewed as redundant, bureaucratic, or – at worst – an obstacle to innovation. During the wide-scale “downsizing” of the 1980s and 1990s, the first victims were often middle managers.

Ironically, even though consultants came after middle management with a vengeance, middle management didn't shrink. It grew. In 2022, middle managers made up 13% of the workforce in the United States, up from 9.2% in 1983.² The “downsizing era” didn't eliminate the role; it redefined it. It didn't die; it multiplied. Middle management turned out to be a lot like dandelions. The more you try to get rid of them, the more they show up.

Today there are more middle managers than ever, and their role is no longer just an enforcer of efficiency or a supervisor who watches over the team. Now, they have to do it all. This is the era of what I like to call the “player-coach.” The burden placed on today’s middle manager has greatly expanded from the 1850s. And with that expanded burden has come almost unbearable expectations. They’re expected to play the game *and* coach the team. To be an individual contributor *and* a team leader. To manage their own to-do list *and* the to-do list of everyone else. The function wasn’t downsized away. They were asked to do more. The result? A role that is more demanding than ever. All of those “ands” make it incredibly difficult. And while the responsibilities have multiplied, the credibility has unfortunately been divided.

I Want to Climb My Way Up to Middle Management

How did a position that was so respected for so long become a place no one wants to land? How did a position that came with status, influence, and pride suddenly become viewed as a dead end? What happened? From my perspective, the answer, in one word, is “Dilbert.”

On April 16, 1989, middle management began its fall from grace, slipping quietly from dignity into parody. On that date Scott Adams published the first *Dilbert* cartoon, and the slow assault on middle management began. That’s the day middle management lost its dignity. That’s the day middle managers went from *hero* to *zero*. Ever since that

fateful day, popular culture has persistently poked fun at middle management. Let me share a few more examples:

January 1999: “When I Grow Up” (Monster.com TV Commercial)

Seen by millions during the Super Bowl, young kids say things like “I want to climb my way up to middle management.” This was certainly meant as satire, but the message hit hard. Middle management became the symbolic embodiment of selling out.

February 1999: *Office Space* (film)

A cult classic. Lumbergh becomes the epitome of the lifeless, passive-aggressive boss. TPS reports, endless meetings, and meaningless work all symbolize the drudgery of office life, and middle managers are the villains.

July 2001: *The Office* (UK TV series)

David Brent becomes the face of cringeworthy leadership: delusional, self-absorbed, lacking self-awareness. A middle manager who wants to be loved, but is utterly ineffective.

March 2005: *The Office* (US TV series)

Michael Scott enters the public consciousness. Well-meaning, deeply awkward, often inappropriate. A middle manager you laugh at, not with. While occasionally redemptive, the series reinforces the idea that middle managers are out of touch and unnecessary.

July 2011: *Horrible Bosses* (film)

The title says it all, right? Three friends plot to kill their middle manager bosses because each one is a different flavor of terrible: manipulative, cruel, or incompetent.

2012–2020: *Silicon Valley* (TV series)

Mocks corporate bureaucracy and clueless middle management in the tech world. Project managers, product leads, and execs are often portrayed as out-of-touch or obstructive.

2019: *Succession* (TV series)

Though centered on high-level executives, the portrayal of the company culture is brutally cynical. Middle managers are largely pawns – manipulated, discarded, or complicit.

2022: *Severance* (TV series)

A dark, sci-fi take on corporate life. Middle management is depicted as sinister and dehumanizing. Work–life balance is so bleak that people literally separate the two halves of their identities to survive it.

Honestly, I shouldn't be too surprised at this attack on middle management. Popular culture has always taken shots at authority. Television and movies have a long history of celebrating the “charming rebel,” the characters who roll their eyes at rules, mock authority figures, and poke fun at the idea of doing the right thing. Think:

- Fonzie on *Happy Days*
- Vinnie Barbarino on *Welcome Back Kotter*

- Bart Simpson on *The Simpsons*
- Zack Morris on *Saved by the Bell*
- Kelso on *That '70s Show*
- Ferris Bueller in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*
- Jack Sparrow in *Pirates of the Caribbean*
- The Dude from *The Big Lebowski*
- JJ Maybank from *Outer Banks*
- Wednesday Addams in *Wednesday*

These characters are wildly entertaining. Their rebellious behavior is what makes the television shows or films worth watching. But in real life, when you strip away their entertainment value, you begin to see things differently. Upon closer reflection, you notice that these charming rebels aren't role models; they're really snakes in the grass looking to attack hardworking do-gooders.

The charming rebels have set their sights on middle managers. The result: What used to be a badge of honor became the punchline. You might be thinking, "Adam, this is just good-natured fun. What does popular media have to do with the real world? Middle managers are doing just fine." Unfortunately, the headlines from the last couple of years tell a different story:

- "Middle Managers Have It Bad: 5 Things They Need Most" (*Forbes*)³
- "This Type of Employee Is the Most Likely to Burn Out at Work" (*Huffington Post*)⁴ (In case it's not

obvious, the “employee” they are referring to is the middle manager.)

- “Layoffs, Burnout, Return-to-Office Wars: There’s Never Been a Worse Time to Be a Middle Manager” (*Fortune*)⁵
- “Managers Are Burned Out. Here’s How to Help Them Recharge” (*Harvard Business Review*)⁶
- “Manager Burnout Is Only Getting Worse” (*Gallup*)⁷
- “20% of Managers Want Out” (*Fast Company*)⁸

I had to stop at six headlines. Believe me, I could have kept going. To make matters even worse, here’s who’s paying attention to all this: Gen Z and Millennials. More headlines from 2024:

- “Conscious Unbossing: Why Gen Z Are Refusing to Become Managers” (*The Guardian*)⁹
- “Millennials & Gen Z Aren’t Interested in Management” (PCBB)¹⁰
- “Why People Don’t Aspire to Be Managers in Today’s Workforce” (*Forbes*)¹¹

Popular media might be having good-natured fun, but real managers are living the lives of “quiet desperation” that Thoreau talked about many years ago in *Civil Disobedience and Other Essays*. When you expand the role but strip away the dignity, you’re left with a situation that grinds people down. I can’t blame the next generation for second-guessing whether they want any part of it.

I don't think Scott Adams set out to bring down an entire professional demographic when he published that first *Dilbert* cartoon. Nor do I believe the current state of middle management is entirely his fault. Pop culture doesn't create these dynamics; it reflects them. It amplifies what's already there. It adds fuel to the fire, but it didn't start the fire. (No, that was not a Billy Joel¹² joke.)

There are two reasons I think the current attitude toward middle management is a shame. One is practical, and one is personal.

Reason #1: Nothing Happens Without Middle Managers

First, the practical reason. In his book *The Captain Class*,¹³ Sam Walker describes how elite teams often succeed because of a “quiet cornerstone,” a team captain who may not be the star player, but who serves as the glue that holds the team together. “Team captain” is such a great way to think about middle management. That is exactly who they are. They are not the head coach standing on the sidelines barking out orders, nor are they general management or ownership sitting in the luxury box watching the game unfold while they sip Johnnie Walker Blue in their Peter Millar quarter-zip. No, middle managers are on the field playing the game, serving as an example as they guide and direct their team. They are the glue. They hold together their organization (and the entire global economy?). Without them, *nothing* gets done. Again, as Sam Walker says so well, “captains are like the verb in a sentence. The verb may not be as memorable as the nouns, as

evocative as the adjectives, or as expressive as the punctuation. But it's the verb that does the yeoman's work – unifying the disparate parts and creating the forward momentum.”¹⁴ I *love* that description. Middle managers are the verbs in a sentence. Put that on a T-shirt.¹⁵

If middle managers aren't healthy, the organization isn't healthy. Remove the verb from the sentence, and nothing moves forward. I want you to feel the weight of that. When middle managers aren't well, the glue starts to lose its stickiness. The impact isn't just organizational; it's global. As the authors of *Power to the Middle* put it, “The very management layer that has been so severely beaten down is now absolutely vital to achieving organizational success.”¹⁶ Preach.

Reason #2: This Is a Rite of Passage

Second, the more personal reason. As I've said, middle management isn't just something you survive. It's not a season that *breaks* you; it's a season that *makes* you. It's a rite of passage. The question worth asking: *What's the point of going through the valley?* My answer: The valley doesn't just do something *for* you, it does something *in* you. It's not just an inconvenient stop on the road to senior leadership. It's something deeper, something transformative.

Rites of passage were not originally designed to be hazing rituals. They were designed to commemorate maturity, learning, the accumulation of wisdom. If the only reason for the valley was to uphold a traditional sense of career

progression, that would be a dumb reason to endure the pressure and stress that accompany middle management. However, if the reason we say “yes” to the valley isn’t to uphold social norms, but rather because we desire transformation, then that’s an amazing reason to go through the valley. It now has purpose. Let me explain this a bit more because I think this is helpful.

Frank, Meet Joseph; Joseph, Meet Frank

Let’s return to the idea of movies because they give us a powerful way to think about this season. Most great stories follow a familiar arc, one that Joseph Campbell famously called “the hero’s journey.” In his 1949 book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*,¹⁷ Campbell outlined a pattern he saw repeated across myths, legends (and we still see today in modern films): An ordinary character is called into something bigger, faces hardship, meets a guide, gains clarity, and returns transformed.

Campbell argues that this pattern resonates because it mirrors real life. We like stories because we see ourselves in stories. The scenes may be fictional, but the emotions are not. We all know what it’s like to say “yes” to something new, encounter hardship, lose our way, gain perspective, and emerge changed. That’s not just a story arc; it’s the human experience.

If we take Frank’s drawing of the valley from the prologue and lay it over top of the hero’s journey, we see something very interesting. We see that Frank’s drawing is only half of the story. The first few elements are present (an

ordinary character is called into something bigger and faces hardship), but it's missing the emotional payoff. There's no guide. No clarity. No transformation. If Frank's drawing were a movie, it would be a really, really bad one. We'd all walk out of the theater and say, "Are you kidding me? That was one of the most depressing and pointless films I've ever seen!"

But this is where Campbell's research gives us hope. Campbell's research shows us what's possible. He shows us how to take what would be a depressing and pointless story and redeem it. Frank showed us that the valley is real and it's difficult. But Frank didn't tell us how to make it through the valley. He didn't give us any hope. He basically said, "This is a challenge; good luck." Campbell, however, shows us something profound. He shows us that yes, every hero faces a valley, and every valley occurs right *before* a breakthrough. Do you see that? If not, go back and reread that last sentence, because it's super important. Frank said valleys are valleys, so get used to it. Campbell says valleys are low points before breakthroughs.

We've All Seen This Movie Before

I don't know why, but when I think about "low points before breakthroughs," I think about the 1984 film *The Karate Kid*.¹⁸ Actually, I know why. It's because I'm a Gen Xer and that film is *amazing*.

This film tells the story of Daniel LaRusso, a teenager who moves from New Jersey to Southern California and quickly finds himself at odds with a group of aggressive karate

students from Cobra Kai, a local martial arts school. After getting beat up a few times, Daniel seeks help from Mr. Miyagi, his apartment complex's humble maintenance man – who also happens to be a martial arts master. Daniel convinces Mr. Miyagi to train him, but Miyagi's methods are anything but traditional. Instead of jumping into punches and kicks, Miyagi puts Daniel to work doing chores: waxing cars, sanding floors, and painting fences. What Daniel doesn't realize is that these repetitive tasks are secretly teaching him the fundamentals of martial arts. In the end, the training pays off. Daniel defeats the Cobra Kai ringleader, earns his victory, and lives happily ever after to film multiple sequels and a Netflix reboot.

However, before living happily ever after, Daniel experienced a fog-filled valley. Getting beat up, sanding floors, waxing cars, and painting fences was all very disappointing, confusing, and disorienting. If you remember, Daniel almost gave up on Mr. Miyagi. Halfway through the film, Daniel decides he's had enough and confronts Mr. Miyagi. He doesn't understand Mr. Miyagi's unconventional methods. Daniel expected traditional training. He wanted to learn karate – to learn how to punch, kick, and block. Yet all Mr. Miyagi seems to be doing is using him as cheap labor. Daniel is not connecting the dots. He's not seeing how the household chores are helping him. All he sees is wasted time.

In this critical scene, Daniel loses his patience and threatens to quit. Mr. Miyagi listens to Daniel's rant and wisely says, "Everything is not as it seems." He then proceeds to show him how all the chores were not really chores; they

were teaching him crucial movements. Daniel wasn't involved in busywork. It was training. Daniel wasn't just working, he was transforming. What looked like manual labor was really a breakthrough in disguise. It didn't look like a rite of passage on the surface, but that's exactly what it was.

From a story structure perspective, when Daniel confronts Mr. Miyagi, that scene is the low point before a breakthrough. This is a classic literary tactic used to keep audiences engaged. The tension of the low point makes the breakthrough emotionally satisfying. There is something that stirs our emotions when we watch the hero in the film find a way through their tough situation. When Mr. Miyagi told Daniel, "Everything is not as it seems," he was basically saying, "You are *this close* to connecting all the dots."

If Frank was playing the role of Mr. Miyagi, he would have listened to Daniel's rant and said, "Listen here, buddy. You chose this life! It is what it is. If you don't like it, just work harder." The film would have ended right there, and we all would have walked out of the theater and demanded a refund. Fortunately, that's not how it played out. Frank wasn't in the film, Mr. Miyagi was, and Mr. Miyagi was a great guide. He gave Daniel the clarity he needed, and Daniel returned to his world a changed person and lived happily ever after.

Can you imagine what would have happened if Daniel had walked away in frustration in that moment? If he hadn't stuck around to see the dots connected? If he hadn't listened to Mr. Miyagi and finally seen that "Everything is

not as it seems”? If Daniel had walked away, then it would have all been a waste. He would have turned his back before the breakthrough broke through. (See what I did there?)

A Season That Makes You, Not Breaks You

Here’s the point I’m trying to make: Frank’s message about the valley had no hope. The valley is a funny and clear description of your reality as a middle manager, but it doesn’t tell us what to do about it. That’s why I want to set Frank’s message aside and pick up Campbell’s. Campbell’s message is filled with hope. He shows you how your story can end well, what you need to make it through your valley. You need a guide, a plan, and courage. That’s it. Frank’s drawing told you how you got here. Campbell shows you how to make it through. A guide, a plan, and courage – those are the only things holding you back.

The headlines I mentioned earlier don’t *have* to be your story. As I said in the introduction, middles are not the end; they are just the middle. Some middles last longer than others, but every middle contains an opportunity for a breakthrough. There is no audience watching you, but you will experience the same emotional satisfaction once you begin to find your way through the valley. I know this can happen. All you need is a guide, a plan, and courage.

I said at the beginning of this chapter that there is a hidden opportunity in the middle of this season, a chance to upgrade your approach to work that will pay dividends. It

will reduce the stress you feel in the valley and produce results. I'm happy to be your guide, and I know I can give you a plan (which I'll discuss in detail during Part II). The courage piece will be up to you, but I'll do my best to help you find it in Part III. If you hang on for a bit longer, I promise you will begin to see progress. To quit now, out of frustration, would be to walk away right before the breakthrough.

This is a season that makes you, not breaks you. This is a season of forging, culling, and development, and none of it is wasted. Of course, you feel tired, burned out, and stressed out. You have one of the most difficult jobs in the world. Few jobs are more challenging than middle manager.

You are living in the era of the player-coach, the era of “ands,” and there is no end in sight. This is not what I expected when I said “yes” to middle management. Is this what you expected? When you started your career and thought about your first promotion, was the valley what came to mind? Did you dream about pressure from the left, pressure from the right, constantly buried under more than you can handle? Probably not. The pressure of middle management is difficult enough, but when you layer the additional complexity of unmet expectations, it can make a difficult situation even worse. These unmet expectations are what I'll discuss in the next chapter.

