1 The Unique Challenges of Those Who Lead from the Middle

At one point, any mid-level manager who worked for the Lego company had the set of directives in Figure 1.1 hanging on their office or cubicle wall.¹

The middle is messy, full of contradictions and opposing agendas, and couldn’t be more critical for a company’s success.

And it’s you. Those who lead from the messy middle work in spots higher or lower in the organization, from Vice Presidents, General Managers, and Directors to Sales, Marketing, and Design Managers, and many more. They have a boss and are a boss, at any level. It’s anyone who has to lead up, down, and across an organization.

Don’t be fooled by the old Dilbert cartoons or Office reruns. Those who lead from the middle, let’s use the often-derogatory term “middle management” for a moment, aren’t the go-nowhere, has-been, mediocre bureaucrats that block progress as popularized in pop culture. They’re the ones that love what they do (mostly) and whose passion and talents make the company hum. They account for
Lead…and keep yourself in the background.

Build a close relationship with staff…and keep a suitable distance.

Trust your staff…and keep an eye on them.

Be tolerant…and know how you want things to function.

Keep your department’s goals in mind…and be loyal to the whole firm.

Do a good job of planning your time…and be flexible with your schedule.

Freely express your view…and be diplomatic.

Be a visionary…and keep your feet on the ground.

Try to win consensus…and be decisive.

Be dynamic…and be reflective.

Be sure of yourself…and be humble.

**Figure 1.1 Lego Directives**


22.3 percent of the variation in revenue in an organization, more than three times that attributed to those specifically in innovation roles, according to Wharton research.\(^2\) A five-year study from Stanford and Utah universities found that replacing a poor middle manager with a good one boosted productivity 12 percent, more than adding an incremental worker to a team.\(^3\)

Those leading from the middle are the key to employee engagement. They interact with the largest part of the organization and have the most direct impact on attracting and retaining talent. In fact, research shows that employees who have strong middle leaders are 20 percent less likely to quit their job if offered more money from another
company. The Boston Consulting Group defined mid-level managers as “vital to success,” according to their massive survey of executives spanning 100 countries that found nearly two-thirds of respondents said middle managers were more critical than top managers.

Whether you lead from the upper middle, mid-middle, or way lower middle, if you have a boss and are a boss, if you lead up, down, and across an organization, take pride in your career-making position. And know the best realize that being in a position in the middle doesn’t mean being stuck in the middle.

It means a chance to lead.

Marty Lyons, legendary former player and longtime radio announcer for the New York Jets football team, would know. Lyons played for the Jets for twelve seasons and led from the messy middle. Literally.

Lyons was a middle lineman sandwiched in between outside linemen Mark Gastineau and Joe Klecko, who along with Abdul Salaam, made up the famous “New York Sack Exchange,” a group that led the NFL in sacks three times between 1981 and 1984. Lyons told me on leading from the middle, “You have to know and embrace where you are and realize that being in the middle is a blessing. It means you have the opportunity to lead in all directions.”

Lyons knew that his role as the middle lineman was to lock up the guys on the opposing front line so that the speedy outside linemen Gastineau and Klecko could get the edge in rushing the quarterback. He wanted to lead from the messy middle so the entire team could lead on the scoreboard. Later on, as Klecko, the locker room leader, got older, Lyons began stepping up to passionately yell and scream and psych his fellow players up before a game. Being in the middle always means the chance to lead, it just requires a keen awareness and understanding of the conditions around you, so you know exactly what actions to take at what time.

And like in football, it requires a playbook. This playbook.
Of course, you don’t run every play in this book all at once and you might not even use all the plays. To succeed in leading from the middle, use the right play in the right situation that’s just right for you. The plays will take many forms of specificity: examples, frameworks, checklists, pointed advice, questions to ask, powerful acronyms, and much more. But before you run any plays, let’s make sure you understand the field conditions.

**Why Is the Middle So Messy?**

I asked more than 3,000 managers who lead up, down, and across their organization what the most challenging thing is about their position. Nearly three-quarters of responses had to do with the scope of their responsibility. Within that broad, daunting scope lie five categories of unique difficulties those leading from the middle face, captured in the acronym SCOPE and illustrated in Figure 1.2.

![Figure 1.2 The Messy Middle](image-url)
Leading from the messy middle means dealing with Self-Identity, Conflict, Omnipotence, Physical, and Emotional challenges. Let’s first spend time illuminating each of these difficulties, then in the next section you’ll get plays to overcome each one.

Self-Identity

When you lead up, down, and across you wear more hats than you can keep track of. It requires constant micro-switching, moving from one role to the other, all day long. (I’ll talk more about the expanse of required roles in the “Rock Your Roles” section of this chapter.) One minute you’re adopting a deferential stance with your boss, the next you switch into a more assertive mode with your direct reports, then into collaborative mode with your peers. You might switch from moments where you’re experiencing tremendous autonomy and a sense of control to moments where you feel like a mere cog in a giant wheel with lots of responsibility but little authority and too little support. You make lots of decisions but maybe not the big, shaping ones. The range of issues and responsibilities is ever broadening, creating still more micro-transitions. Role switching fatigue is exacerbated when you have to perform in front of different levels of management or different functions within one meeting or when you unexpectedly have to jump into one of your roles you weren’t mentally prepared to play.

The net result is exhaustion, frustration, and confusion about who you really are and what you should be spending your time doing, which is further exacerbated if you’re working in a poorly defined role with unclear expectations and uncertainty about how far your authority extends. And to cap it all off, all the micro-transitions that force you to be spread thin can leave you feeling that while you’re certainly busy, you’re uncertain of the impact you’re really having.
Conflict

When you’re surrounded on all sides, it’s impossible not to experience conflict. But the leader in the middle has the dubious honor of trying to manage it all. There are natural tensions in the role and pressure that comes from all sides. Your boss cajoles, your employees resist, your peers won’t collaborate. You absorb discontent from all around. You deal with conflicting agendas, conflicts of interest, and interpersonal conflicts. If you hear the mantra “more with less” one more time, you might more or less lose it, desperately wanting to counter with “How about we do more with more for once?!” You’re inundated with the busywork that comes from being in the middle and being tied to processes and systems and yet you’re subject to the time-sucking whims of your chain of command.

You constantly make trade-offs relative to expectations and reconcile priorities with the capacity and talent you have to do the work. You’re rewarded for great work with more unexpected work. You’re constantly putting out fires but are expected to consistently put up the numbers. You must fiercely compete for and flawlessly allocate resources while fending off those who want more resources from you. You disagree with or didn’t have a say in some of the biggest decisions from above and yet have to respond to a lack of understanding and agreement to the direction from below.

Mary Galloway, an Industrial and Organizational Psychologist and faculty member of the Jack Welch Management Institute, told me, “Middle managers are like the middle child of an organization, often neglected by senior managers and blamed by their reports. However, they’re still expected to be as charming as the youngest and simultaneously as responsible as the oldest. We end up with middle child syndrome, enshrouded in conflict, wanting more of a say, and not sure how they fit in.”
The Unique Challenges of Those Who Lead from the Middle

**Omnipotence**

No one expects frontline, lower-level employees to know everything; they’re too inexperienced or too new. Senior managers are excused from this standard because they don’t need to know everything, that’s what they have their middle managers for. Besides, they make big bets all day, which means big mistakes, which among senior leaders are often seen as a badge of honor.

So where does that leave those who lead from the middle? Like you’re expected to know everything, like omnipotence is written into the job description. You have to keep one foot in strategy and the other in day-to-day operations and tactics. You should know your business inside and out and know your competitors just as well. Your market share ticked down in Peoria? You should probably know why. You have to explain the *what, how, and why* and decide *who*. You must know how to handle the changing nature of work with remote work, global conference calls at ungodly hours, and scads of contracted work the norm. You’re expected to know how to grow others despite a lack of investment in you, and without time to grow yourself.

**Physical**

You’ve probably heard the term “monkey in the middle.” Researchers from Manchester and Liverpool University studied this exact subject, spending 600 hours watching female monkeys in the middle of their hierarchy. They recorded the range of social behavior, including aggressive behavior like threats, chases, and slaps, submissive behaviors like grimacing and retreating, and nurturing behaviors like embracing and grooming. They then measured fecal matter for traces of stress hormones (I’ll pass on that duty). They discovered that monkeys in the middle of their hierarchy experienced the most social and physical
stress because they deal with the most conflict, you guessed it, up, down, and across their organization. This directly corresponds to what researchers find in the monkeys’ slightly brighter cousins, the human beings. In fact, a study of 320,000 employees found that the bottom 5 percent in terms of engagement and happiness levels weren’t the people with poor performance ratings or those so new they hadn’t moved on yet from an ill-fitting job, but five to ten-year tenured employees in mid-level roles with good performance ratings. 8

In another big, multi-industry study, researchers from Columbia University and the University of Toronto found that employees in mid-level roles in their organization had much higher rates of depression and anxiety than employees at the top or bottom of the organizational hierarchy. In fact, 18 percent of supervisors and managers experienced symptoms of depression (40 percent said the depression derived from stress), 51 percent of managers were “constantly worried” about work, and 43 percent said the pressure they were under was excessive. 9 Eric Anicich of the University of Southern California’s Marshall School of Business says the constant micro-transitions from frequent role changes are psychologically challenging to the point of detriment. 10 For example, disengaging in a high deference task to engage in a high assertiveness task leads to even more stress and anxiety, and a host of related physical problems like hypertension and heart disease.

**Emotional**

Being in the messy middle means dealing with some unique emotions. It can mean a sense of alienation, isolation, and loneliness, as being in the middle makes it hard to really be a part of anyone’s group. Employees can stay at arm’s-length, as can bosses, and yet the middle manager attracts and absorbs discontent from every angle, adding to the emotional toll. I’ve heard many of those who lead from the middle describe feelings of being overworked and underappreciated,
expressing great frustration over wanting to change things around them but being unable to do so, not feeling like they can control enough of their destiny. Not to mention that middle managers are often the target of layoffs or can be displaced on the promotion path by outside hires, which can take a huge emotional toll on one’s self-esteem and sense of fairness in the world.

A Reframework

While the scope (SCOPE) of what makes leading from the middle so messy can feel daunting, it doesn’t have to. Through decades of research and experience I can share with you a framework, or actually a reframework, to help you reframe the way you see, experience, react to, and ultimately resolve each of the specific difficulties outlined. (We’ll get into the overall mindset required to thrive as a leader in the middle in the next chapter.) Let’s go through the SCOPE acronym again, this time armed with reorienting insights to help reframe and reshape the way you view the inherent, unique difficulties associated with leading from the middle.

Self-Identity

While you’re constantly switching roles and changing hats, in flux between high-power and low-power situations, your identity is never actually in flux, even though it might feel like it. An organization is like the human body, it needs a healthy, flexible core. If you strengthen your middle, you strengthen your entire body. If you strengthen the middle of the organization, you strengthen the entire organization. You are the core, flexible center and the center of strength for your company. Take pride in that truth.

Here are some other reframing insights to help you fully appreciate your pivotal place in the organization.
1. You work not in an organization but an organism. And you’re the lifeblood of it.

2. You’re the ultimate catalyst from which progress pulses, the amplifier. We’ll cover this in depth in Chapter 3, “The Skillset for Leading Effectively from the Middle.”

3. You’re the keeper of the long and short-term flame, working on the business and in the business. This is a unique privilege that those leading from the middle experience.

4. You’re a lighthouse and a beacon, signaling threats and drawing all toward opportunities. It’s a powerful duality. For example, being in the middle means you’re best suited to spot external threats from competitors and identify internally generated ideas for innovation.

5. The micro-transitions you’re constantly making aren’t segmented, they’re integrated. The 100 jobs you belong to add up to one vital job you’re uniquely suited to do well. Value the variety.

6. While you might be the “middle child,” the middle child is also resourceful, creative, and independent. Galloway reminded me of this, and she’s right. These are all things to take pride in.

Conflict

Leading from the middle might be rife with tension, but it also means you’re in the thick of things, where the real action is. Your job is to embrace constant contradiction, revel in it, and know that thriving in environments of natural conflict is a valued skill in and of itself. When
it comes to environments of conflict, you can shirk, shrink, or shine. Choose the latter to climb the ladder.

More reframing insights follow.

1. **You’re not squeezed in the middle; you have the unique opportunity to impact in all directions.** There’s no position quite like it.

2. **Instead of getting frustrated that you can’t specialize when you’re in the middle, which makes it difficult to grow your craft, view the action in the middle as your craft.** Redefine success as having mastery over nothing except knowing you must know enough of everything, which takes a special breed to do well.

3. **Home builders need permission on everything, business builders don’t.** So stop asking for permission on everything. Expand your authority within reason. For example, align objectives with your boss upfront, and if your intended action will serve the objective, act, don’t ask.

4. **Sure, you’re in a pressure cooker, but you can release one of the valves—the pressure you put on yourself.** If you’re focused on constant learning and growth, on becoming a better version of yourself each day and not comparing to others, on chasing authenticity instead of approval, pressure becomes an enabler, not a disabler.

5. **Know that ongoing conflict is essential to producing the best work.** And you have the opportunity to harness conflict for maximum effect. For instance, I always found that our team produced the best ideas the fastest when we engaged in healthy debate, not when everyone agreed quickly. That’s something you can facilitate (you’ll get help on that in Chapter 3).
6. **The reconciling and reprioritizing habits you’re building in the middle (side effects of continually dealing with conflict) will serve you at the top, and everywhere else.** More so than any other habits you forge.

**Omnipotence**

Not knowing can feel like a cardinal sin when you’re leading from the middle. But as much as it might feel like it, your job isn’t to know everything. In fact, a client I keynoted for had the following sentence painted on the wall in their headquarters lobby: “There’s a cost to knowing.” It’s a reminder to their managers that trying to know everything before moving forward comes at the cost of speed, missed opportunities, and more important priorities neglected elsewhere. For certain, it takes time and resources to know things. Make that known and be aware of the tradeoffs involved for having personal knowledge on a subject. Then, discern if it’s worth you personally knowing it. In fact, focus more on discerning what you should know than trying to know everything. Just as important is to build a knowledge system where, if you don’t have the answer, you can quickly access someone who will.

Then try the insight-driven plays that follow.

1. **Regarding high pressure meetings where you’re expected to have all the answers—know what you’re truly expected to know, but don’t stress out trying to plan for every contingency.** Invest the time to prepare for the meeting and anticipate the questions most likely to come up, and be okay with leaning on the knowledge system you’ve built up for the rest. Ask yourself, “What would the meeting attendees want to know about the subject at hand? What concerns or issues might they have? What are other sources I can have at the ready to answer questions outside my direct realm of expertise?” It’s
about instilling confidence and an unswerving faith that you and your knowledge system have things covered, not that you personally have the answer to every question.

2. Take pride in what you’ve chosen not to know. For example, I used to refuse to know some of the smallest details of a project because of the cost of knowing that. I took pride in delegating and empowering others to have the knowledge in certain areas while I focused on knowing enough about that area to be able to ask the right questions and to instill confidence in those evaluating me.

3. Know that it’s not about omnipotence, it’s about omnipresence. Leaders from the middle should be everywhere in their business, leaving an imprint on virtually everything within their purview (within reason and within boundaries, as I’ll discuss in a moment). It requires thoroughly knowing the fundamentals of your business inside and out, but that doesn’t come from personally knowing everything. It comes from being present and engaged enough in all aspects of the business (with enough attention to the fundamentals) and by being inclusive and interested enough to engage with all the experts on your business.

Physical

Leading from the middle can most certainly take a physical toll. But you can’t take care of everything, or anything, if you don’t prioritize taking care of yourself first. That’s straight from the playbook of life, let alone this playbook.

Here are a few more reorienting insights to help reduce the physical drains.

1. Know that while you can impact everything, you’re not responsible for everything. Period.
2. **You’re in the middle but aren’t at the epicenter of every earthquake.** Not every fire drill needs to be answered. Everyone else’s urgent is not your urgent. And acting like it is isn’t a good place to be. To illustrate, I can say my most ineffective stint as a middle manager occurred in a role where fire drills constantly sprang up. Instead of filtering them, I fed them, creating a flurry of activity that distracted my organization from more important priorities. Learn from my mistake.

To push back on repeated urgent requests, come from a place of accountability. Meaning, let the requestor know you can’t accommodate because of the impact it would have on other critical priorities. Give them a different “yes” by empathetically offering alternatives to you dropping everything. Show them support in other ways.

3. **Your physical health and succeeding at work aren’t mutually exclusive.** Step out of the grind long enough to realize that. Put your health on a pedestal, the investment will pay dividends personally and professionally. For instance, I find my work gets better the more time I take to work on my health.

4. **Be bound by boundaries.** While leading from the middle requires a strong presence everywhere within your scope of responsibility, it doesn’t mean your work should cross over into every aspect up, down, and across the organization, and of your life. Boundaries are more important in the middle than anywhere else in an organization because more people have access to you, and so you’re disproportionately exposed to stress triggers.

First, give yourself permission to set boundaries. Then, take the time to define what your boundaries are (what you’ll engage in, when, within what parameters) and clearly communicate them to others. Pick low-risk situations to practice saying “no” and commit to
delegating more. Create structures and processes to help control work and time flow (like agendas), and stick to them. Finally, identify what needs to change to enable your boundaries (like new habits at home that would help keep work at work).

**Emotional**

It’s hard not to get caught up in the emotional strain of being in the middle. But remember that you’re part of a pattern. It’s not personal, it’s a reflection of the position itself.

Here are reframes that speak to the nastiest of the emotional toll—the sense of isolation and being undervalued.

1. **It might feel like you’re on an island at times, but that can be a good thing.** You’re actually a safe haven for workers to express frustrations, voice concerns, share ideas, and take risks without fear of undue punishment. I once took my team to an art studio where each member painted a picture of an island, as a symbolic gesture that *this* team would be an oasis, unlike any other team in the company, a safe-haven and enjoyable place to be, free from typical company nonsense.

   At the same time, of course, you also connect to the rest of the organization, and connect disparate parts of the organization to each other, by building bridges.

2. **You’re not alone, you’re on loan, a ninja in the middle, there to make the engine hum.** You’re there until your talents elevate you upward in the company or across to something you’re more interested in.

3. **Senior managers might not always acknowledge your value, but everyone else does.** Recall the earlier Boston Consulting Group research—you’re more appreciated than you realize.
4. While at times it might feel like you’re not in control of much of anything, you’re always in control of your attitude. Just as important, you may have become numb to the amount of daily influence you have in the countless tradeoffs and decisions you make every day. No one in an organization makes more decisions that matter each day than those who lead up, down, and across.

Rock All Your Roles

We talked earlier about the wide variety of roles someone who leads from the middle must take on. My research reveals there are 21 distinct roles middle managers must play. Think of what follows as a 21-gun salute. I’ll honor each role with a brief description and then give you plays for each one (I call them “Role Plays”), in the form of the single best piece of advice to succeed with each hat you wear.

1. Translator

A core role of the middle manager is to receive the vision and strategies from above and ensure everyone down (and often across) understands that direction.

The Role Play: Key here is to know that you’re not just an explainer, you’re an expander. Always add your perspective to upper management directives and help employees understand how their work specifically fits into the broader mission. Give a chance for employees to react to the direction and express concerns (knowing that resistance is often just a cover for wanting to be heard).

2. Converter

Just ensuring everyone understands the direction isn’t enough, of course. Middle managers must also convert those visions and strategies into concrete and organized business plans and tactics.
The Role Play: It’s critical to do so with an eye on the three c’s: competition, capacity, and the customer. Too often I’ve seen well-intended middle managers develop plans in a silo. They don’t consider key competitors’ potential reactions, they ignore capacity and try to do far too much while not making enough choices (the easy thing is to do everything), or they fail to truly understand the customer’s needs and habits when developing the plans and tactics.

3. Strategist

The best in the middle aren’t just tacticians, they also play an active strategic role. No one is closer to changing market dynamics, has more access to new information coming in, or has a closer pulse on what the organization would rally behind. So often I hear, “Strategic thinking is the last thing I have time for” from middle managers. But it should be the first thing you make time for as it impacts every other role you play.

The Role Play: Toggle between the three strategy jobs to do (many mid-level managers stop at the first job). First, cascade top-down strategies to fully implement top management’s intentions. Start by fully understanding the strategies, then share perspective to gain commitment when converting the strategies into operational tactics. Second, shape top-down strategies in advance by analyzing information available to you, assessing opportunities and threats, and sharing your perspective and recommendations with decision makers above you. Finally, champion “on the ground” strategies, ones that you and your team create and implement given what you know by being closest to customers, consumers, and competitors. This last strategy job to do is the most often missed or underserved, which is a travesty, as one study showed that a whopping 80 percent of strategic projects initiated by top management failed while 80 percent of those initiated by mid-level managers succeeded.11
4. Catalyst

Almost by definition, if you manage up, down, and across, you’re the one who makes things happen. If it is to be, it’s up to thee. It’s easy though to get caught up triggering a flurry of activity that’s not necessarily the right activity.

*The Role Play:* Try the powerful question that follows; I used to ask myself this as a filter before initiating anything: “Am I about to make the right thing happen at the right time for the right reason?”

5. Designer

This means designing structures and processes to support macro-organizational designs.

*The Role Play:* Don’t design in a silo. Enroll the people who will do the work in the structures and processes you design. What looks good on paper often doesn’t translate in the real world. More structure and process are not always the answer; the mortal enemy of the Designer is the Overengineer.

6. Implementor

Sometimes your job is to simply implement someone else’s strategies or plans.

*The Role Play:* But even then, think about this role not as order-taking, but as closing the gap between intention and implementation. In other words, fully understand what the strategy or plan is intended to do, but don’t just execute it blindly. To meet that intent, make adjustments and adaptations along the way based on the circumstances. While situational leadership is most certainly a thing, so is situational followership.
7. Decision Maker

All. Day. Long. That’s what those in the middle do, make decisions. Key is to ensure you’re deciding on the maximum number of things that make the biggest impact.

*The Role Play:* Negotiate your level of authority to avoid ending up a victim of what researchers call the Karasek model, which says stress is maximized in conditions of high responsibility with little authority to make decisions. Be bold. Get clear on where your decision-making power starts and ends and push the boundaries. Craft an agreement for autonomy with your boss where you spell out the scope of what you get to make the call on and how your boss will be kept up to speed and can input on what you decide.

8. Resource Allocator

Some of the most frequent decisions those who lead from the middle make is how to allocate their resources.

*The Role Play:* Many things go into good resource allocation, but the most important play is to not underestimate the cost of getting it wrong. For example, poorly allocated resources mean employees are underutilized, projects are delayed, margins drop as more last-minute contractors are hired, and key projects are under-resourced or staffed with the wrong skill sets or equipment. Work as hard and carefully at allocating your resources as you did at obtaining them.

9. Synthesizer

Mid-level managers are at the intersection of the horizontal and vertical information flow in the company; it’s easy to get overwhelmed. But the best middle managers avoid analysis paralysis while carefully processing the most important information and using it to trigger action.
The Role Play: The key to being a good synthesizer of information is to listen carefully and be critical of everything you read and hear. The opposite is all too common. For example, it’s not unusual to see those leading from the middle take new information and run straight out the window with it because they were in a hurry to decide, because they were overwhelmed with information and just making the call was the easiest way out, or because they weren’t skeptical and analytical enough about what was being presented to them. Missteps here also include missing the things not being said or written, failing to keep the motivations in mind of the presenter and getting overly swayed by emotion, and failing to spot discrepancies in data or questionable data sources.

10. Intrapreneur

This refers to taking the initiative to advance innovation, to act like an entrepreneur, within your company.

The Role Play: Deloitte research shows the key to doing this well is to avoid the most common intrapreneurship trap—favoring familiar ideas close in proximity to existing solutions over unfamiliar, new ideas (ones that could result in far more meaningful innovation). This may mean taking calculated risks, breaking some rules, and working “underground” (away from broader scrutiny) with your innovation as long as possible to achieve your goals.

11. Bridge Builder

Everything meets in the middle, by definition. And the middle manager builds the bridges to connect all sorts of groups, up, down, and across the organization to make things happen. Bridges are built and maintained on trust, the subject of many books, so I’ll simply laser in on one aspect of this here.

The Role Play: Remember that every action you take will be put by observers (even if subconsciously) into one of two classifications:
something that builds trust or erodes it. Research shows the three best ways to visibly reinforce trust are revealing your thoughts about important issues and encouraging others to raise issues, admitting mistakes, and acting consistently with company values. The opposite of any of these things can destroy the trust you’ve built up in the blink of an eye. In the middle especially, every action produces a rippling reaction of trust built or broken.

12. Framer

Getting things done from the middle happens by constantly providing context up, down, and across, and by shaping decisions.

The Role Play: Key here is to remember that without proper framing, the building of a house will never progress. Likewise, without proper framing, building support for ideas and desired decisions will never progress, either. So, invest the time it takes to mold and shape the inputs to get the desired outputs. For example, give well-prepared recommendations framed with multiple options and pros and cons for each.

13. Sense Maker

We’ve established that the middle is messy, which means what passes through it doesn’t always make sense. Employees can easily lose the bigger picture and the plot, disconnecting from why they’re doing what they’re doing and wondering if what they do matters. A big role of the middle manager is to connect employees with the meaning in and at their work.

The Role Play: As I explain in detail in Make It Matter, you create meaning for employees by connecting them to the higher-order purpose behind their work, by feeding their learning and growth, by stoking their sense of competency and self-esteem, by granting autonomy liberally, and by nurturing a caring, authentic, teamwork-based
environment. When you help make meaning, you help employees make sense of why they’re spending so many hours at their job.

14. Champion

The effective leader in the middle champions ideas they believe in up, down, and across the organization, helping them to fruition.

The Role Play: The key here is to act as an active sponsor, not a passive fan of the initiative. True champions of an initiative or idea roll their sleeves up to help. They bring in allies for support, help overcome detractors, and tout the initiative’s benefits while helping identify weaknesses to be shored up. Champions are in a unique position to help an initiative team see around corners and anticipate barriers. Use that power to aid progress.

15. Facilitator

This is about constantly controlling flow, keeping things moving to achieve goals. In the end, no one must be more action-oriented than those who lead from the middle; otherwise you become the bottleneck.

The Role Play: Here’s the trick to being a great facilitator, drawn from my experience as a leadership training facilitator. The most important rule of running great training is to design the session with the participants’ experience in mind. Think of each opportunity to facilitate in this light. For example, perhaps you’re facilitating a meeting between Sales and Product Supply to develop a plan to ship enough product into stores for an upcoming promotion. What does Sales want to experience from the meeting? Put yourself in their shoes. What does Product Supply want to experience? How can you orchestrate the experience of the meeting to produce an outcome that moves things forward?
16. Buffer

Being in the middle means being subject to abruptness and unintended consequences all around. Sometimes you have to scrub and filter messages from others before passing them on, reworking the message to reflect its intent, not its poor execution. Sometimes, a mediator is needed in between parties to keep both sides positive and forward focused. Sometimes a layer is simply needed between the most senior leaders and those below to soften the blow of communications or actions.

_The Role Play:_ Central to being a good buffer is purity of intent. If you have the right intent, you have the right to shape the content. It’s not about withholding information or warping truth. It’s about carefully molding communications and maintaining a positive culture to help the organization achieve its goals.

17. Straddler

Those in the middle must straddle between long-term objectives and short-term goals, balancing the need to attend to both.

_The Role Play:_ Key here is to not think of the long and short-term as distinct entities. When considering long-term objectives, evaluate current short-term actions to ensure they feed the longer-term objectives. It’s easy to lose the plot and chase urgent priorities of the moment that are, in truth, inconsistent with achieving a long-term objective. And when engaged in short-term activities, pay attention to what you learn along the way and let it inform and inspire the formulation of long-term objectives.

18. Accountability Czar

Fostering a sense of accountability isn’t just about holding your employees accountable. It starts with you acting like an owner and
holding yourself accountable, as well as holding senior managers accountable.

_The Role Play:_ Author Peter Bregman has the essence of driving accountability exactly right—it’s about achieving clarity on five things. Be clear on expectations, capability (resources and skills required to complete the work), measurement, feedback, and consequences. It’s as simple as that, but know that it’s an all-or-nothing proposition. If you miss on any one of these five points, accountability will crumble.


Each of these vital roles will be covered in depth in Chapters 3, 5, and 6, respectively.

Those who lead from the middle experience a breadth and depth of scope and roles like no one else in an organization. Revel in the choreographed dance you excel at. Believe that leading effectively from the middle is a craft and that you’re on your way to becoming a craft master, something to take pride in. Know that you don’t have to be _the_ leader to be _a_ leader. Realize that you’re the center of progress, that you exist to make a profound impact and to infuse your workplace with energy and a winning attitude. Believe that you’re a tour de force and attack your scope and roles with passion, fueled now by power plays for each scope and role challenge.

Know that leading successfully from the middle is also a mindset and a skillset. So, set your mind now to Chapter 2, where we open the playbook to learn the mindset required.

Notes:


7. “Monkey Study Reveals Why Middle Managers Suffer the Most Stress,” manchester.ac.uk (April 2013).


