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Mending the Middle Tips for Action

Senior management needs to do most of the heavy lifting this time round since the middle managers are tired, frustrated and have a sense of powerlessness. They believe that senior management is disconnected from the harsh daily realities.

Senior management needs to **connect** with middle managers. Take the time to listen and empathise. They'd like to know that their efforts are appreciated - and they'd like to be recognised when circumstances permit.

Senior management needs to **engage** their middle managers. Ideally, give them a role in strategy formulation and, at the very least, share the organisational strategy and rationale for choices with them.

Senior management needs to **equip** their middle managers to function effectively, outside of crisis mode. Allocate the additional budget for development you feel is warranted.

Middle managers will no doubt take their own action. In the first instance, use this opportunity to develop the skills that were highlighted as most challenging: influencing strategy, driving execution and managing change.

If you are a middle manager unimpressed with the development offering, take steps to influence the content and format to better meet your needs. Press for measureable outcomes!

Finally, in the interests of well-being, remember that you are where you are because you choose to be there!

HANGING BY A THREAD: MIDDLE MANAGERS IN AUSTRALIA

Taking the middle manager pulse in Australia

In our May 29th edition, *Melting in the middle*, we shared data from the US report on middle managers completed in February 2010. Since the data was so concerning, we decided to poll the UGM database to get a sense of how Australia compared with the US.

In order to achieve a rapid turn-around, we opened the survey for a week only during June 2010. In all, 56 people from 14 different organisations completed our survey, and we are about to release our research report. This newsletter outlines our key research findings, which can only be described as disquieting.

Organisations take note

A comment from one of our manager/non-manager respondents captures well the sentiments which emerged during data collection. "Currently the volume of work you are expected to do is unsustainable. There are simply no staff to undertake the work and middle managers are facing burn-out. Within the last two months several have resigned to move into different roles. Add into the mix expected retirements and a knowledge gap is looming. Remuneration for the role undertaken is not adequate and morale although high at the outset of 2010 is trending downwards."

Key Research Finding 1

At current levels of middle manager performance and engagement, short term goals (2010-2011) will be achieved only with difficulty. There is much more uncertainty around longer term goals (3-5 year horizon).

Unsurprisingly, but critically important, we found that middle managers and senior management are not equally confident about targets being reached in both time horizons. Middle managers are a lot less confident about short- and long-term prospects. A lack of confidence is not the best frame of mind for tackling problems or leading a recovery.

Key Research Finding 2

Concerns around Finding 1 seem well-founded. Overall, middle managers are described as being in a bad way.

Middle managers are characterised as having high (and unsustainable) workloads and little or no control of strategic direction and resourcing. As a result they see themselves as frustrated. Senior management commented that middle managers aren't sufficiently connected with strategy and have also faced considerable uncertainty.

Managers and non-managers describe the group as tired, undervalued and unappreciated, without sufficient senior support and all agree they have little control over strategy and resources.

Key Research Finding 3

There are vital differences between what middle managers see as their key challenges and what senior management thinks these are.

Middle managers in Australia want a greater influence on organisational direction. It's their key challenge, by far. Strategic execution comes in as a strong, but clear second. Senior management thinks driving strategic execution is the biggest challenge for middle managers and only rate influencing organisational direction as the 4th biggest challenge.

This issue boils down to buy-in. Middle managers will be more likely to drive execution if they had a hand in forging direction. Closer to the coal-face, they're also likely to better understand what's needed.

Key Research Finding 4

A large proportion of survey respondents rated current development programs for middle managers very poorly.

A key finding in the US Survey was that HR Executives rated the middle management development programs for which HR was responsible as poor. In this Australian study we find that these development programs also rated badly. Only one middle manager labelled 2 out of 6 aspects of leadership development as Very Effective. Senior management had a slightly rosier view, with around 14% rating most of the 6 aspects as Very Effective.

Nevertheless, only two aspects (relevance 62%; support of organisation 57%) garnered more than 50% support when Very effective and Effective were combined. Around 30% of senior management rated the 6 aspects of middle management training as Ineffective, while 16% of middle managers described training as Very Ineffective and an average of 21% (rising to 53% for support) regarded aspects as Ineffective.

Implications for your organisation

UGM recognises that all organisations are different. Indeed, conditions often vary substantially among business units in the same organisation. Thus the picture that our respondents (and the US Study before it) sketched may/may not mirror your organisation in every respect.

This is a good time to reflect closely on how well your middle managers are faring. Can you say you know for sure? If they're hanging on by a thread you may want to take some action, or you are likely to see them depart at the first opportunity!

If you would like a copy of the UGM middle manager research report, please drop us a note at research@ugmconsulting.com. We would also welcome any comment to the same address.□