

How to Support Middle Managers in a Hybrid Workplace

By Arlene S. Hirsch

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As organizations continue to evolve their hybrid workplace strategies, the plight of middle managers is starting to come into clearer focus.

"Middle management has always been a challenge, even without layering in the complexities of hybrid work. They are navigating and leading in the 'messy middle' where they have to advocate for senior leaders while also leading their teams," said Liz Pavese, who is based in Seattle and is director of behavioral science at CoachHub, a global digital coaching platform.

Research shows that challenge is taking its toll. In a recent pulse survey of 10,000 workers conducted by Slack Technologies' Future Forum a record 43 percent of middle managers say they're burned out—the highest of any job level. While the people they manage report higher levels of satisfaction and productivity as a result of greater workplace flexibility, middle managers feel less connected to their companies and are far more likely to look for a new job.

Middle managers also reported the lowest scores for work/life balance along with the highest levels of stress and anxiety. One reason is because they're responsible for bringing their teams back to physical workplaces at a time when employee resistance is high.

"We are in the middle of a workplace transformation, and we need to support midlevel managers so they can support the people they lead," said Sue Bingham, founder and principal of the HPWP Group, an organizational development consulting firm in Rome, Ga., and co-author of the book *Creating the High Performance Workplace: It's Not Complicated to Develop a Culture of Commitment* (Indie Books International, 2018).

A lot of the stress and anxiety middle managers are experiencing could be alleviated if they were given more authority and influence, Bingham said. "The midlevel manager role needs to be structured as a leadership role. Managers need to be given the resources and tools they need to lead."

Repairing the Breakdown in Trust

Middle managers often view HR more as adversaries than allies, and as the place where employees go to complain about their bosses. It's important that HR takes steps to try to improve that attitude.

"The role of HR is to validate the experience of managers and teach them how to manage in a hybrid environment," said Ken Matos, director of people science at Culture Amp, a New York City-based employee engagement platform. "Middle managers are woefully underserved and unprepared to manage in a hybrid environment," and it's HR's responsibility to help change that, he said.

"Midlevel managers are HR's most important customer," Bingham added. "This comes down to asking them for feedback, taking that feedback to heart and putting their insights into action."

While working as an interim CHRO at the University of Maryland Medical Center, Jennifer Pitts would drop in on meetings among middle managers, either in person or via Zoom. For many of the managers, it was the first time anyone from HR had listened in on their discussions.

"When you take the time to really listen, communicate and provide feedback to middle managers, it creates an environment of psychological safety and sends the message that you care about them and want to support them," said Pitts, now a senior principal at Korn Ferry.

"Communication can break down when people don't take the time to get to know each other," agreed Ryan Agresta, founder and CEO of the HR tech platform Candidate.co in Seattle. "HR needs to gather the data from middle managers to understand their most pressing needs and concerns and use that data to make changes."

Although middle managers are the heart of a company's culture, their needs and concerns are often overlooked, said Rosina Racioppi, president and CEO of Brielle, N.J.-based Women Unlimited, a leadership development organization for high-potential women. Racioppi recommends gathering objective, unbiased data from middle managers to better understand their most pressing needs and concerns.

Leadership Development Training

Many organizations have implemented leadership development programs to fill the preparedness gap among middle managers. Louise Axon, director of content strategy and development for Harvard Business Publishing in Concord, Mass., has identified the following three attributes of the most successful leadership development programs:

1. Relevant and timely content.
2. Learning that is immediate and actionable.
3. Learning that meets managers where they are, regardless of whether they are working remotely or onsite.

As the chief people officer at UiPath, an enterprise software company in Oakland, Calif., that builds robots, Bettina Koblick was responsible for implementing a leadership development program for people managers that was built around their specific needs and concerns, as well as organizational goals and objectives. Koblick described herself as a "true believer in the upside-down triangle where information streams from the front lines to the leadership development team."

Koblick's team regularly uses pulse surveys to ensure that what participants learn in each program results in real behavioral change. If they don't see real behavior change, they adjust their approach, Koblick said. "Fundamentally, we want to make sure people are heard, treated fairly, and have clarity and context," she said. "We build competencies around those outcomes."

The Coaching Solution

Coaching also can be a powerful complement to reinforce lessons learned during training sessions.

"The goal of coaching is to apply what you learned in training," Pavese said. "Research shows that it takes six months of coaching for managers to adopt a new mindset because old beliefs get in the way."

Although coaching has historically been reserved for C-suite executives, providing one-on-one coaching to midlevel managers can make sense. "Many middle managers aren't trained as leaders. They don't have a [business] school education or really understand how to manage people in a hybrid environment," said Lisa Kaplin, an executive coach in Lake Zurich, Ill. "Coaching equips them with the skills they

need to implement senior leadership strategy and vision and lead their own teams."

Coaching also can help prepare them for senior leadership roles. "Executive coaching is part of succession planning. It prepares middle managers to move up," Pitts said. "And it sends the message that the company is committed to them and invested in their development."

While many organizations leave it to managers to find their own coaches, Pavese recommends using artificial intelligence (AI) technology to match middle managers with coaches to give them more control over who they work with. While external coaches are often perceived to be less biased than internal ones, there is value in teaching HR professionals how to coach middle managers.

"In order to build trust, HR needs to move from a compliance perspective to a coaching role," Kaplin said. AI technology can also be an effective way to match middle managers with mentors within an organization, she said. This includes traditional mentoring as well as reverse mentoring and peer mentoring.

"Technology can eliminate inefficiencies in the mentoring and networking process and take the burden off people managers to play Cupid," said Dave Wilkin, co-founder of 10KC in New York, a software-as-a-service platform for networking, mentoring and professional development.

The Power of the Peer Group

"Hybrid makes the job of middle managers harder because they don't have the same connection to senior leaders or their teams. [Lack of] connection and belonging are the straw that breaks the camel's back," Wilkin said.

Agresta has led and hired middle managers in a wide range of companies and believes that a tight peer group is key to having a fulfilled and generally excited tier of middle managers.

"Middle management can be isolating because they are often caught in the middle between senior leaders and individual contributors," he said. "They need to be able to rely on each other for support. But those relationships are harder to build in a remote or hybrid environment."

While some leadership development programs use a cohort model so middle managers can learn from and support each other, Bingham recommends that HR take the initiative to assemble meetings specifically focused on middle managers (via Zoom or in person) for that same purpose.

Another way to boost morale among middle managers is creating a support group where they can tap into each other's experience and brainstorm solutions to problems, Matos said. They can also invite senior leaders to drop in on these groups to build a stronger connection between senior leadership and middle managers.

"A disconnect occurs when people don't feel seen and valued, which can lead to resignations and 'quiet quitting,'" Racioppi said. HR can help heal that disconnect by building stronger relationships with middle managers, she said, and by creating opportunities for middle managers to bond with senior leaders and each other.

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