

Why Middle Managers Are Ready to Demote Themselves (and what you can do about it)

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Reality Check

- 52% of middle leaders claim they have more responsibilities since the recession but no new title
- 89% of middle leaders do not feel well-prepared to lead change and make tough decisions
- 83% do not feel satisfied with their overall performance as a business leader
- 70% would take a demotion to a non-leadership role for the same or less money
- 64% say they are not likely to be with their current employers in 2 years – *are we surprised?*
(All resources available upon request)

What went wrong?

While money and managing people were major motivations for aspiring to middle management, something went awry. Middle managers don't feel successful. They don't feel like leaders. They don't know how to thrive, let alone survive. And they are ready to throw in the proverbial towel.

What happened?

We forgot to help them win.

The influence of loss aversion

People see themselves as winners, not losers. And **they'll go out of our way to avoid feeling like a loser.** What makes people feel like a loser? Any situation where they are failing or flailing.

In the world of behavioral economics, this is called "Loss Aversion." According to this cognitive bias, when people perceive that they are about to lose, **they get irrational with fear which manifests in procrastinating, excusing, hiding, defending, CYAing, blaming, and running away.**

Babysitters or Change Agents?

Desperate to fill gaps in the talent pipeline, we anoint people "managers" if they can fog a mirror. "Just babysit the people below you, make sure they execute, and don't get us in financial or legal trouble. How hard can it be?" For some managers, that sums up the guidance they receive. Even babysitters receive better instructions when we hire them to watch our kids.

But we don't need babysitters, we need middle leaders. We need people who will lead change, execute on priorities, and make the tough decisions.

How can we expect managers to achieve change-agent status when all we've done is changed their title?

Why should we care about helping the middle win?

Middle leaders are the Velcro of the organization. They hold it together. They are the liaison between ideas and execution. **They are the reason that people stay or leave organizations.**

And yet, almost 40% of companies rate the skills of their middle managers as fair or poor. And in Britain, 62% of directors say their middle managers lack management leadership skills, while 38% say their organizations are paralyzed by ineffective middle management.

Why is that acceptable?

Isn't it vital that we set managers up for success instead of failure, that we stop ignoring them, that we throw away the second-hand development that doesn't even fit their situation or needs, and that we quench their thirst to contribute and make a difference?

5 ways to help middle leaders win

1. **On-board for 1 year.** We on-board new employees to organizations. We apprentice everyone from lawyers and architects, to plumbers and electricians. We even require waiters to job shadow. We must on-board new managers and **it must be a requirement and a ritual**. In this structured, **ceremonial rite-of-passage, we should mandate leader-shadowing, training, developing, coaching, mentoring, and deliverables.**
2. **Assess and self-assess and re-assess.** We must assess these new leaders as they take on their new roles, and we must re-assess them regularly. We should also direct these new managers to assess *themselves* regularly. Require them quarterly to **draft and solicit their own 360-surveys to ascertain how they are doing in the eyes of their peers, their bosses, and their colleagues.**
3. **Develop and be developed.** These people are so hungry to be developed and we're so hungry to get them executing. We *can* do both, but it must be a priority to develop them to execute *the way you want* them to execute. So don't pull them off campus for a week-long seclusion every year. Keep them in the game and **develop them while they are executing. In addition, require them to develop the next round of new managers.**
4. **Mentor forward, backwards, and sideways.** These people need mentoring from above, from below, and from the side. They need formal, structured, mandated **leadership mentoring** from leaders who have been there done that. They need formal, structured, mandated **reverse mentoring from individual contributors** who have worked with managers and can share their perspective. They also need formal, structured, mandated **peer-to-peer mentoring. And they need to serve as the mentor for others... immediately.**
5. **Rename them "Middle Leaders."** Let's stop calling them "Managers" and start calling them "Middle Leaders." We want them to lead but **we have boxed them in with a title that dictates that they merely manage.** These are our leaders. Let's not wait for them to act like leaders before we call them leaders. Let's leverage the concept of the Pygmalion Effect. **Treat them like leaders now and watch as they quickly mold their mindset and their behaviors to act like the leaders they want to be and the leaders we need them to be.**