

# Business Manager

Vol. 24 No. 04 October, 2021 Single Copy Rs. 125/-

Making HR People Complete

Harjeet Khanduja | Uday Tulapurkar | Bimal Rath | Lopamudra Banerjee  
Sanjay Bose | Dr. Naresh N. Mehta | Dharmendra Singh Negi  
Lalit Chaturvedi | Indranil Banerjee | R N Nalbalwar  
Panchakshari Math | Vikas Sharma



## The Middle Riddle

Dr. NARESH N. MEHTA

# Middle managers should learn the ART OF REPAIRING "THE HUMAN"

While success is initiated at the top of the organisation and fulfilled at the bottom, it is lead, developed, nurtured, and matured in the middle of the organisation. This developing, nurturing, and maturing require middle managers who fulfil their leadership roles as integrators, facilitators and implementers.

**How do you decode the Middle Riddle? What are the most relevant issues involved with middle managers in the organisations?**

**NN** The middle managers are secreted assets of an organisation and they play a pivotal role to achieve business objectives. While the top and senior managers are responsible to craft business strategy, the middle managers are responsible to deploy various tactics for effective execution of business strategy. When it comes to organisational vitals such as maintaining tiny pulse in terms of employee engagement, enhancing the abilities of their subordinates, motivating team members, and providing opportunities to staff for demonstrating their knowledge and skills, they are "unsung superheroes" of the workplace. When it comes to communication of shared

vision, goals, and strategy, they are the lifeline of the organisation. They are "superhuman beings" when asked to provide psychological safety to their teammates, their retention through rational and emotional engagements, their professional career development, reward and recognition of their teammates, fixing their compensation, addressing their social needs and grievances. They are worriers when the top and senior managers shift the decision-making related to everyday operations to their middle managers who are closer to operations and customers to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the organisation. Further, middle managers are responsible for managing the daily workflow of their team. Their goal is to make sure the day-to-day tasks of their staff are meeting the overall objectives of the company. While working in this role, they make sure employees

are staying focused on their work. In a true sense, middle managers have many levers in their hands for inspiring the success of both organisation and their teammates.

Despite carrying the crucial responsibilities, the people above and below the middle managers carry negative perceptions about them and such perceptions might be because of narrow, local perspective and poor lateral, cross-functional cooperation and teamwork at the middle level. The middle managers have little power, spends a lot of time micro-managing people, and whose career is in a pothole. Further, they are often wretched, mocked by their subordinates, and bullied by their bosses. They are struggling when it comes to maintaining a sense of belonging, and they feel more stressed and less productive than their senior colleagues.

**Does the Corp Inc. recognize the existence and value of middle managers? If yes, why it is not visible and appreciated enough? If not, what reasons you can count upon?**

**NN** Organisations and social scientists have long seen middle managers as a target for assigning blame, invisible, most ignored, unrecognized and unattended assets in most organisations. They are undervalued and seen as "unwanted fat" in the belly of





the organisation! They are seen as "speed breakers" and "bureaucrats" hampering the growth of the organisation. They are targeted first in downsizing, rightsizing, and re-engineering exercises under the plea of organisational flattening. They do not consider the pivotal contribution middle managers make to innovation and change in large organisations. Top leaders' general directives to open a new market, improve quality, or cut costs mean nothing without efficient middle managers just below officer level able to design the systems, carry out the plans,

have not understood today's simultaneous calls for unity and diversity!

### Do you think that the middle managers are self-responsible for their misery or failure in the organisation? What can be the strategies to make them more competent?

**NN** The *first aspect* of the role for middle managers today is to act as an integrator. As an integrator, the middle manager complements the unifying role of the top manager and responds to the call for

rewarded within its workgroups. Unity and diversity are promoted as the middle manager serve as an implementer of supporting systems. As today's middle managers act as integrators, facilitators, and implementers, they will adequately complement the role of top management, respond to the simultaneous calls for unity and diversity, and ensure organisational success. Middle managers who neglect these duties will not succeed. Teams with managers who ignore these duties will struggle. Organisations that lack middle managers who pursue these tasks and activities will, in the long run, fail. The most profound strategy deployed by contemporary organisations is intensive coaching and mentoring of individuals and teams to build the capabilities of middle managers and thereby enhance their bandwidth. While success is initiated at the top of the organisation and fulfilled at the bottom, it is lead, developed, nurtured, and matured in the middle of the organisation. This developing, nurturing, and maturing require middle managers who fulfil their leadership roles as integrators, facilitators, and implementers. The top and senior managers shall have to play the role of "farmers" to cultivate the crops of middle managers.



and redirect their staffs' activities accordingly. Furthermore, because middle managers have their fingers on the pulse of operations, they can also conceive, suggest, and set in motion new ideas that top managers may not have thought of. Perhaps, the top and senior managers have not understood the cost of not having middle managers! Some seniors have concluded that the loss of middle managers equates with the loss of valuable skills and the vital strategic capability necessary for organisational success. While the foregoing costs are real and substantial, they often go unnoticed because their direct monetary value is not easily calculated. Perhaps, they (seniors)

organisational unity. Unity is addressed by several activities of the middle manager. The *second aspect* of the role for today's middle managers is to be a facilitator of group processes. As a facilitator, the middle manager supplements the top manager's unlocking of leadership potential already resident in the organisation's members. Human diversity is fostered and served by this aspect of the middle management role. The *third aspect* of the role for middle managers is to act as an implementer of supporting systems at the workgroup level. As an implementer, the middle manager ensures that the diversity and unity desired by top management are nurtured by the organisation and

### How the engagement level of middle managers can be increased?

**NN** The top and senior managers are the orchestrators of the organisational concert. The organisation is a dancing floor for employees and the top and senior managers are sitting in the gallery. While they have a gallery view of how employees are performing in the farthest corners of the organisation, middle managers have a limited view of their team performance in proximity. If the top and senior managers invite middle managers occasionally to take gallery view, they will realize that how the whole organisation is performing and how beautiful it looks, enhances the engagement levels of middle managers. The *first aspect* of engagement is communicating shared vision and goals through their active involvement and participation during team direction workshops. Some enlighten CEOs more often

invites their star middle managers in visioning and strategy workshops. Such gestures enhance the rational engagements of middle managers. The *second aspect* of engagement is taking an active interest, showing curiosity in what middle managers are achieving and appreciating, recognizing, and encouraging their efforts. The *third aspect* of engagement is making yourself available as a top and senior manager to middle managers as and when and where required by them to provide support in their weak moments and also during celebrations for their achievements. It is all about spending sufficient time with them for socialization. The *fourth aspect* is to provide them servant leadership. This will boost their emotional engagement with their leader and curb turnover intentions. The *fifth aspect* is to think about their well-being and investing in their career development. These are the least initiatives to be driven by the top and senior managers to enhance engagements with middle managers.

enable the freer, the more democratic flow of information, there will no longer be any need for middle managers whose sole job is to route information between the top and bottom of the company. This means that middle managers should

something that is infinitely more important: building and connecting the people that are the true lifeblood of any organisation.

The COVID Pandemic is a temporary situation and has a short-term abrasion for the business world. I strongly believe that today's organisations may not realize it yet, but the three trendiest words in the business world, 'vision', "un-copiable complex capabilities" and 'core competencies,' will probably make middle managers fashionable again.

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Do you agree with the argument that HR functions should be delegated to middle managers to manage their people issues directly? Will it be helpful for the organisation? If yes how the shift should be achieved?

NN The middle line managers are the custodians of one of the most valuable intangible assets - "The People" through which the organisation creates a sustainable competitive advantage. The role of middle managers is like *KINTSUGI - THE ART OF REPAIR*. Things may fall apart. That is life. But if middle managers are wise, they can use every scrap, patch themselves up, and keep going. That is the essence of resourcefulness, resilience, persistence - the most demanding qualities of middle managers to bounce back in the current times of Pandemic. Every middle manager should learn the art of repairing "The Human" - The people of their organisation. This art transforms "The Human" into something new, making it more rare, beautiful, and storied than the original. It would be safe to delegate the HRM function to middle managers as they know their people better than anybody else in the organisation. The key to this switchover is to sensitize them about human values so that they do not treat them as resources but possibilities. **EM**

Whether the role of the middle managers will be eroded or changed significantly in post covid scenario of changing work methods? How do you visualize the challenges coming on the way?

NN The COVID Pandemic has forced the rapid shift to distributed teams and remote work over the last year. This has expanded the challenges for modern middle managers. But it has also created an unparalleled opportunity to rethink the role of top management for a new, digital-first world. As digital technologies

be empowered to focus on the vital work of forging connections, building belonging among diverse employees, and developing talent. This means investing in training for communication skills, inclusion techniques, and coaching. This also means reducing the total number of middle managers, so that resources can be focused on supporting a smaller group of dedicated leaders. Instead of being stuck in the middle, managers will be free to focus on

About the Author

Dr. Naresh is a Thought Leader and a Facilitator in the areas of Whole System Transformation and Strategy Management. He has worked for 36 years in Industry. He is best known for his research skills and designing interventions for capability development and long-term competitiveness. He has played pivotal roles in leadership positions for over four decades in various industry sectors.