

## INSIGHTS

# The Middle Matters!

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### ABSTRACT

Middle leaders, often overlooked in favor of executives at the top and frontline staff at the bottom, are the essential connective tissue of organizations. They bridge vision and execution, shape culture through daily interactions, and translate values into practice. In times of volatility, they become steady hands and trusted voices, guiding teams through uncertainty. Yet these leaders face shrinking ranks, expanding responsibilities, and insufficient support. To close the growing leadership gap in the middle, organizations must reframe middle management as a strategic asset, developing, empowering, and honoring these leaders as indispensable drivers of culture, performance, and moral leadership.

*Keywords:* middle managers, leadership gap, moral leadership, organizational culture, values-based leadership, leadership development

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### Introduction: The overlooked power of the middle

Leadership is often framed through the lens of either those at the top in positions of authority (the visionaries setting direction) or those at the bottom (the people on the front lines executing strategy). Yet between these two realms lies a crucial, yet often underappreciated, powerful force: the middle. Across the public, private, nonprofit, and government sectors, those in the middle (some titled with positions of authority such as “Middle Managers”) act as the connective tissue that sustains influence, shapes culture, and drives long-term impact. It’s not just “tone at the top,” it’s also “mood in the middle” and “buzz at the bottom” shaping an organization’s ethical culture and probability of success (Ethics & Compliance Initiative, 2018).

Studies on peer effects in performance (Carrell et al., 2009) and leadership networks (Brass, 1984, 1995) highlight that influence is often driven laterally rather than strictly hierarchically. Previous work published in the *Journal of*

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*Character and Leadership Development* has explored themes of leadership and moral development across levels, emphasizing how peer-driven learning environments can strengthen character and leadership (Born and Caliguiri, 2024; Born and Megone, 2019; Born and Yemiscigil, 2024; Cook et al., 2021; Dimmock and Born, 2023).

The importance of middle-level leaders is recognized across sectors. The Project Management Institute (PMI), for example, emphasizes the central role of project leaders in “leading change via teams” to deliver value, shifting away from a narrow focus on “management” to a broader perspective that aligns with contemporary organizational demands (Project Management Institute, 2021). The role of middle management has become both more complex and, in many cases, more overlooked in organizational strategy (McKinsey and Company, 2023). During the pandemic, many organizations eliminated middle management roles as part of hierarchy-flattening initiatives (Chartered Management Institute, 2023). Now, amid ongoing restructuring, AI-driven job displacement, and persistent labor shortages, fewer professionals are stepping into these roles (Deloitte, 2024). Globally, 75% of employers report difficulty filling key positions—an all-time high (ManpowerGroup, 2024). This shortage is compounded by a growing reluctance to pursue managerial positions; for example, many new leaders enter their roles without adequate preparation, and nearly half underperform within the first 18 months (Sull et al., 2021).

At the same time, the capacity of those who remain in middle management is being undermined by insufficient training and evolving expectations. Drawing on research published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, Zhang (2024) notes in *The Middle Manager of the Future* that today’s middle managers are increasingly expected to shift from commanding to coaching, requiring a deeper focus on human-centered leadership (see Zhang, 2023). A McKinsey report (2023) echoes this

concern, warning that organizations are “wasting their most precious resource” by failing to support middle managers with the autonomy, tools, and trust they need to lead effectively.

This challenge is further exacerbated by insufficient investment in professional development: 84% of U.S. managers report needing more training on leadership and people management skills (SHRM, 2022), and over half say they receive inadequate organizational support to succeed in their role and hybrid work (Gallup, 2023, 2024). Without intentional development, middle managers are left to navigate increasingly complex demands without the scaffolding to thrive.

This reinforcing challenge of declining interest in management, elevated expectations, and inadequate support has left organizations with a widening leadership gap in the middle. For example, 44% of U.S. professionals report that their company has reduced manager-level roles (Korn Ferry data cited in Gavett and Sawhney, 2025), and Gallup finds managers are experiencing the sharpest decline in engagement of any employee group (Gavett and Sawhney, 2025). AI is ushering in a new middle management era (CIO, 2024). And yet, in times of volatility, middle managers are often the most essential: they translate strategy into action, hold teams together, and model values under pressure (Gavett and Sawhney, 2025; McKinsey and Company, 2023).

These capabilities closely align with The HOW Institute’s Moral Leadership Framework, which defines moral leadership as a practice guided by purpose, elevated by character, and demonstrated through behaviors such as building trust, leading with moral authority, and inspiring and elevating others (The HOW Institute for Society, 2026a). When middle managers embody these behaviors, they serve not only as operational leaders, but as cultural stewards who carry and scale values across the organization and beyond.

The HOW Institute's 2026 State of Moral Leadership in Business Report reinforces this urgency. While 94% of employees believe moral leadership is urgently needed, only 6% report that their top-tier leaders consistently demonstrate it (The HOW Institute for Society, 2026b). This moral leadership gap is most pronounced in the middle, where values must be interpreted and lived through daily decisions. The gap reveals not a lack of intention, but a lack of investment in the capabilities, support, and cultural alignment middle managers need to lead with moral authority.

### Reframing leadership: The call to action

Ultimately, leadership may be less about formal position and more about the practices and relationships that bring it to life. There is growing recognition of the need to re-examine how leadership in the middle is understood, developed, and valued.

Leading from the middle can involve cultivating influence through relationships, character, and the courage to uphold shared values, while also incorporating diverse perspectives and contributions. Middle managers, in particular, can serve as translators, connectors, and curators of organizational culture. Their influence often emerges not solely from formal authority, but from how they live out shared values, foster trust, and navigate tensions across teams and levels.

In this vein, revitalizing the middle is not a matter of tacking on another initiative to an already crowded leadership agenda; it requires reframing middle managers as indispensable value creators who connect vision with execution, culture with performance, and strategy with the real-world experience of teams. Achieving lasting change demands investment not only from middle managers themselves but also from the senior leaders empowering them and the systems that shape the conditions in which they operate. In today's increasingly complex world and workplace, marked by shifting

stakeholder expectations, accelerated change cycles, and heightened ethical demands, empowering effective middle managers calls for a deliberate shift in how senior leaders approach the middle. Four interdependent priorities, in particular, stand out:

1. **Cultivate translation skills.** Equip middle managers with the vocabulary, frameworks, and facilitation techniques needed to interpret and communicate organizational values and strategies. Create forums for collaboration (across silos) and invest in ethical decision-making training.
2. **Foster humility and courage.** Move beyond traditional leadership development to incorporate reflective practices, ethical scenarios, and feedback systems. Encourage peer learning communities that balance stepping back with stepping forward.
3. **Prioritize human connection.** Encourage empathetic leadership, build trust across teams, and remain attentive to human impact. Model relational leadership at the top and embed it in performance expectations.
4. **Make the middle a destination.** Recognize and reward excellence in middle management. Reimagine these roles as endpoints in themselves, not merely stepping-stones to executive positions.

The shift in PMI's PMBOK® Guide toward "leading change via teams" offers a powerful model for re-positioning middle leaders as catalysts for organizational agility, innovation and success. Rather than seeing them as mere implementers of directives, PMI's framework underscores their potential to bridge strategy and execution, shape high-performing teams, and adapt in complex environments, capabilities central to the *Middle Matters!* thesis.

This call for a new model of leadership reflects a broader movement toward a Human Economy, one in which trust, character, and moral courage are not only ethical imperatives but also defining strengths

in an increasingly complex and interdependent world (Seidman, 2017). In this emerging era, it is not only *what* leaders do that matters but also *how* they do it, with purpose, principle, and humanity. Middle managers are uniquely positioned to bring this “how” to life. As vital connectors between values and action, culture and performance, they occupy the moral space where organizational integrity is forged and sustained. When empowered to lead with moral authority, they shape organizations that are not only more effective, but more human, and ultimately more worthy of the people within them and the communities they serve.

As Dov Seidman (2025), Founder and Chair of the Board for The HOW Institute for Society, stated in a commencement address to the University of Miami School of Law: “*We are no longer living in a merely connected world, but in an interdependent one, where the consequences of our choices ripple across people, systems, and societies. In such a world, the question that matters most is not ‘What can we do?’ but ‘What should we do?’*” This shift from possibility to responsibility calls for a new kind of leadership, one grounded in moral courage, human dignity, and principled actions. Nowhere is this more essential than in the middle.

Middle-level leaders, those who bridge vision and execution, must not only model values but animate them in the face of complexity. When they lead with purpose and moral authority, they become stewards of culture, translating ideals into daily practices and sustaining them over time. In doing so, they help build institutions that are not only high-performing but also high-integrity, institutions that earn and keep the trust of those they serve (Seidman, 2025; The HOW Institute for Society, 2026b).

Ultimately, the future health of our organizations will rest on how well we invest in and trust those who lead from the middle. When supported to act with courage,

clarity, and compassion, these leaders deliver more than results: they safeguard values, strengthen trust, and weave the moral fabric that holds the institution together. The middle matters now more than ever, and how we empower it will define not only our organizations’ effectiveness, but their integrity and legacy for years to come.

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