

# Four Roles of Middle Managers

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I often coach people who are middle managers. They're strong, brave people doing their best every day to become more effective and help their employees and organizations thrive. Middle managers in large, complex organizations have many unique challenges. They need to have the skills of the strategic and systems mindset, but they **also** have to have the executable skills of driving change and leading people. They need strong interpersonal skills to ensure that people interact well with their team and across departments and they need to keep their team's morale high so good work gets done. And, in many ways, they are between a rock and a hard place. The "rock" is the executive team who has set the strategies and systems and the "hard place" is interpreting those for the employees and motivating people to make those goals come true.



One of the best articles on the subject that I have ever read is [In Praise of Middle Managers](#) by Quy Nguyen Huy. And while this article is dated 2001 – the points he makes in this article are even more relevant in today's corporate setting. He sees four important roles of an effective middle manager.

First, because **middle managers have a unique organizational position they are more likely to have ideas about how to grow and change the business.** They are close to the daily operations and see where problems arise, yet they're far enough away from the details to stay connected with the big picture strategy. It's also true that as a whole, middle managers are more diverse in work and life experience, organizational function, gender and ethnic background than senior leaders and as a result, their ideas and insights are more broad and creative. It would serve senior management well to have strong communication channels to and from the middle managers of the organization.

Second, middle managers are typically very effective at leveraging the formal and informal networks within an organization to get things accomplished. They make the senior executives' strategy come alive by translating it to others on their team and implementing it by breaking it into specific tactics and action plans. This often requires middle managers to collaborate and communicate within their own department and across multiple departments. Middle managers know how to get people on board by using their social skills, networks and influence across the company to focus on the speed and quality with which the strategy is implemented as well as the results it achieves.

Third, effective middle managers sometimes have a role that almost feels like that of a therapist. They need to stay attuned to employees' moods and emotional needs while also making sure the momentum of work

is maintained. Because senior managers are isolated from many of the people doing the work, middle managers have a unique role of addressing the employees' emotional well-being, especially during times of radical change. If middle managers try to move beyond the emotions too quickly, the corporate culture will be affected, and people may leave the company or become less engaged in doing good work.

And finally, middle managers manage the balance between doing things consistently and improvement. If a department or organization never changes, they could fall into inertia and become extinct. On the other hand, if things are continually changing and things never seem to be done in a systematic or easily understood way, that would be too chaotic. Both of these extremes can lead to under performance. Like many aspects of the job, middle managers need to find the middle path: the right mix of two seemingly opposite viewpoints that may feel like a rock and a hard place. And for that, we should respect the middle manager and all they do.

**Key questions to consider regarding your middle management team:**

In your organization are Middle Managers:

- Asked about ideas they have to grow and change the business?
- Welcomed to share their perspective on issues?
- Supported for the action plans they create?
- Encouraged to work across departments on complex challenges?
- Provided professional development for expanding their emotional intelligence?
- Supported by senior leadership for the complex role that middle managers play?