

Let Middle Managers Manage

In the annals of corporate reorganization, the eighties might well go down as the decade when CEOs rediscovered their workers. Walking the plant floor and the front lines, CEOs found that employees knew a lot about how the business worked and had suggestions worth following. This revelation, together with a competitive environment that demands quality, flexibility, and customer satisfaction, has paved the way for such concepts as the delayered organisation, flattened hierarchies, empowered employees, and self-managed work groups.

The results are now coming in from these brave new reorganization programs, and they are mixed. After months of drafting vision statements and rearranging organizational boxes, many companies have bogged down in the muddy terrain that separates theory from implementation, change on paper from change in reality. What went wrong? In their eagerness to unlock the creativity of the worker, some companies neglected a most valuable and necessary player in any change process – the middle manager.

The Management Vacuum

Stationed between the executives who shape the new vision and the employees who are to carry it out, middle managers are in the ideal position to bridge the gap between vision and implementation. With their years of experience and knowledge about the business, they are the people who can show newly empowered teams what to do and how to work effectively.

Japanese companies are noted for building on the experience and knowledge of their middle managers, but American companies have often undervalued them. Now they may be confusing

them as well. Told they should relinquish their former roles of directing and enforcing, some managers are at a loss to know what they should be doing instead.

Empowerment can be abandonment when employees are given responsibility without guidance or training. A vice president who suddenly shows up one day and tells his plant manager that he will have sign-off authority for \$ 1 million instead of the \$ 5,000 he formerly had isn't empowering his employee, he's setting him up to fail.

Many companies are now struggling with the consequences of moving too quickly from authoritarian management to little or no management. Given new power and responsibility but little guidance and instruction, employees can become confused and demoralized, programs can get slowed down, and the sceptics of change seem justified.

Managers Are Essential

Of course, we prefer to think that employees will happily rise to meet any new challenge, and that given the opportunity, they will exhibit the necessary initiative and ability. This can happen. But it is not realistic or fair to expect people to acquire the experience, skills, and information they need overnight. Nor should they be expected to show unbounded enthusiasm for something they haven't done before and that looks like more work and responsibility with little likelihood of success.

Here's an example from a Fortune 100 company that shows the value a strong middle manager can add. This middle manager had run up against a problem common to companies undergoing organizational change: her people were taking too long to establish viable cross-functional teams. She suspected that their often-voiced scepti-

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cism about the new process was a contributing factor.

The usual approach to this problem would be to call the group together for a series of pep talks on the new vision, its goals, and its purpose and to remind them that it's up to them to make it happen. Instead, the manager drew up a list of detailed activities and requirements – number and length of group meetings, who would attend, a list of prioritized problems for each group to address, the required deliverables, etc. – and insisted each team accomplish its assignment by a deadline and report back. She also arranged a training program for people who lacked skills for facilitating cross-functional teams and agreed to meet with any team whenever asked. What's more, she made it clear that she was available to help.

Forced to perform the required activities, the group learned that the change did, in fact, lead to impressive improvements. By determining what activities were necessary to get teams working cross-functionally and requiring that they perform them, in spite of their scepticism, the manager gave them the experience of success, which led to a change in attitude.

Reactivate the Middle Manager

Ask yourself the following questions to determine whether you are getting the full value from your middle managers:

- Do my managers have a clear vision of how our business works as a whole, not just in their functions? Have they ever met a custo-

mer? Do they know the business from the outside in?

- Do they understand that their role is not only to communicate the company vision, but also to determine which processes and activities will make it a success? Do they know how to focus people on processes and the appropriate activities? Do they know how to co-ordinate these processes horizontally and vertically?
- Are my middle managers spread too thinly? Have I given them the adequate time, training, and resources needed to succeed?
- In the attempt to empower the workers, have I undermined the managers? Do my managers have to direct the workers in performing the necessary activities?
- Do my managers feel that they are part of the solution, not part of the problem?

Eager as we are to unleash the initiative and creativity of our work force, we must remember that employee empowerment is a goal to work toward. The transformation from authoritarian to participative management cannot be accomplished in a single leap, and it should not by-pass the middle managers. Rather, it must evolve over time and with help from all levels of the organisation. No one can help to speed this evolution along more than middle managers. Employee empowerment may mean fewer managers, but the role those managers play will be even more crucial to the company's success.

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