

Bridging the White Space: Creating a Powerful Middle Team

By Marcia Hyatt and Ginny Belden-Charles

The executive was frustrated. He frequently was mediating conflicts between his direct reports. How was it that people responsible for large business units were unable to get along? He did not have time to deal with their issues. Why wasn't there more cooperation and coordination among his direct reports? Maybe he needed to talk to Human Resources about bringing in some "real" team players for his unit....

Working with managers, from front line supervisors to heads of business units, one will find there are predictable patterns of disconnection between functional managers across the organization. These patterns, identified by Barry Oshry (1994, 1995), include: poor communications, duplication of work, internal competition, lack of synergy, and short-sighted solutions. When there is a silo mentality it is thought to be a function of a person or of the organizational structure. The real cause of this dysfunction is systemic, predictable and fixable.

In this article, we examine the "middle space" in organizations. "Middles" in a system are those who are in the middle of the hierarchy or those caught between conflicting demands. The ones in an organization who experience this the most are the management layers between top executives and front line workers. In some systems this could mean 4-8 layers of management. We will look at the conditions that exist in the middle and the common systemic patterns that these conditions create. We will share success stories of middles who have effectively integrated, what they have been able to accomplish, and the organization mechanisms that have helped them bridge the white space to create a powerful middle team.

Middle Space

"I don't see that it's worth a lot of my energy to meet separately with my peers. They're not the ones that make things happen around here. I don't trust some of them, with others I have conflicts over goals, others are trying to look good, and the rest have nothing to do with me getting my job done. I have so much on my plate, the last thing I need is another meeting."

The middle of an organization is often a painful place to live. By virtue of their position, middles are pulled in many directions. It is difficult to please anyone. Their bosses expect them to get certain results from their staffs. Their staff expects them to get resources from the bosses. Customers, other departments, and productivity goals all pull at them. . Because middles are pulled apart from each other and dealing with their own agendas, they do not see the value in getting together with other middles. Many middles feel isolated. Without understanding or an intervention, this leads to alienation from one another. Alienation leads to competition, to judging one another or not trusting one another.

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We structure organizations to break down complex tasks and resources into manageable components. No matter which way the pie is sliced up, we create separate units and those units have the potential to become organizational silos. Silo mentality occurs when managers respond to the demands of the job, become focused on their own functional area and do not have mechanisms to integrate with other middles in the system.

The middle dis-integration is not because middles are inherently poor team players; it is because middles don't understand why they are alienated. And more importantly they don't see the value of integration. Even if they come to see the potential benefits of integration, most find it difficult to start because of poor peer relationships or because of their over-loaded calendars.

Middles and their failure to integrate is one of the great organization tragedies. They have such potential power to positively impact a system. The system needs those in the middle of an organization to share information, work information, solve common problems, and support one another. Middles are uniquely positioned to deal with common organization maladies - poor communication, poor coordination across silos and frustrated change efforts. Yet it rarely happens.

Creating a Powerful Middle Team

The company had to change to be successful in the changing marketplace. The new structure had middle management (VP level) owning their regions like a small business. They were accountable for profit and loss. This was a new way of operating. The design committee knew these middles needed to learn from each other (fast) to survive and thrive in this new way of operating. Integration teams were structured across the company. Their assignment was to learn from each other. Most VP's entered this forum reluctantly. Some barely knew each other, others lacked respect for their team members, and some were in conflict. Through required regular meeting, and a facilitated process they achieved results. A three year evaluation showed the teams had positively impacted business results and strengthened peer relationships.

As Barry Oshry states, middles need a structure to integrate effectively. Ongoing Integration Teams provide a powerful mechanism to bridge the white space in organizations. These can be initiated by upper management, Human Resources or the middles themselves. Effective Integration Teams:

Meet as a peer group. They can be groups of peers within the same business unit, parts of a customer supply chain, intact teams, or leaders from different parts of the organization. The key here is "peers only". When bosses are in the room, the consequence is reduced safety, more vulnerability and more motivation to look good rather than learn.

Focus on compelling work challenges. Integration teams work on individual or shared work issues. Members of the group must have direct capacity to act on issues they bring into the group. When the issues are compelling and the work results in tangible benefits on the job, middles discover the benefits of meeting and make the time to come together.

Commit to meet over time. Organizations need ongoing middle integration. Meeting periodically ensures learning translates into action. Also, it takes time to overcome the effects of alienation. After several meetings, relationship and trust are strengthened; then learning can occur.

Engage in a structured reflection that results in strategic action. Integration Teams that sustain over time need to move beyond the surface level of information exchange or office gossip. Teams that self-sustain learn how to address the deeper challenges they and their organizations face.

Getting Results through Middle Integration

Here are some examples of results achieved by middles bridging the white space:

Thinking and acting systemically

The team of cross-functional middle managers had spent the meeting addressing individual work challenges when they discovered a common denominator in each of these challenges. The way they managed and tracked customer files was broken. Up until this meeting, they were each trying to fix aspects of this individually. But now they could see how the problem was systemic. Instead of working the issue separately, they worked together to fix the process, identified someone at a higher level who could sponsor their efforts and solved the issue within 3 months.
-- Insurance Team

Coordinating efforts

After 3 months in our new job, most of us wanted to quit. We each had a different client base to serve. We were going crazy trying to address the expectations of the clients and the expectations of the corporate office. Once we began to meet and reflect regularly, we saw opportunities to divide and conquer. We also used the time to coach each other about how to manage this difficult job. The coaching and finding ways to avoid duplication freed us up to be more strategic. It is hard blocking a day every few months to meet, but I DON'T have time NOT to meet.
--Human Resource Team

Becoming a better leader and coach

"I am now learning to ask a lot of questions to help people come up with their own solutions rather than me giving them all the answers. Often it even happens in the hallway now. When my employee asked me what to do about his project, I asked him what he would do if he had to make a decision tomorrow, told him to think about it overnight and get back to me in our one-on-one meeting the next day. In the past I would have likely given him my answer, rather than helping him learn to make tough decisions and helping my team stand on their own two feet."
-- IT Director

Middle managers have the potential to make a significant impact on organizational results. Too often this impact is diminished through a failure to work together effectively across the organization. Integration teams are a proven way to help middles bridge the white space and become a powerful leadership force in their organizations.

References

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