HOW IMPORTANT ARE MIDDLE MANAGERS?

A scientific overview

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Scientific overview: A research landscape about the significance and role of Middle Managers

**View I**
- Middle Managers are not needed
- Middle Managers don't add value
- Technology is the better Middle Manager
- Middle Managers demotivate employees
- Mentors are needed instead of managers

**View II**
- Middle Managers lack potential
- Middle Managers are needed
- They lack key skills
- They are demotivated
- They slow down progress

**View III**
- Middle Managers have a great potential
- Middle Managers as strategy implementers
- They are eager to learn
- Middle Managers as change agents
- They need a certain learning environment
View I on role of Middle Managers

**Middle Managers don’t add value**

“Middle Managements today tend to be overstaffed to the point of obesity” (Peter Drucker, 1986)

“We were hiring people just to read the reports of people who had been hired to write reports“ (Jack Welch)

“Whole layers of management neither make decisions nor lead. Their main role is to serve as relays. (Peter Drucker, 1988)

**Middle Managers demotivate employees**

“A related problem is that the most powerful managers are the ones furthest from frontline realities. All too often, decisions made on an Olympian peak prove to be unworkable on the ground. (…) Narrow an individual’s scope of authority, and you shrink the incentive to dream, imagine, and contribute.” (Gary Hamel 2011)

**Technology is the better Middle Manager**

“Technology can monitor performance closely, provide instant feedback, even create reports and presentations. When technology can play much of the role of the manager – why have one?” (Lynda Gratton, 2011)

**Mentors are needed instead of managers**

“Generation Y workers see no value in reporting to someone who simply keeps track of what they do, when much of that can be done by themselves, their peers, or a machine. What they do value is mentoring and coaching from someone they respect. Someone, in other words, who is a master—not a general manager.” (Lynda Gratton, 2011)

**Critical comment on View I**

Human empathy cannot be replaced by a machine and overly downsized structures do not fit the requirements of a high performance organization.
### View II on role of Middle Managers

#### Middle Managers are needed

Their role is “increasingly important because formal structure, specializations and occupational subcultures create structural holes in the organization.” (Shi, Markoczy and Dess, 2009)

More horizontal structures increases the importance of MM in achieving competitive advantage (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1994; et al).

#### They lack key skills

They have no longer the advantage of superior knowledge and experience because of very detailed knowledge among employees (Freimuth et al, 2003)

“They are dinosaurs, not fit for the volatile business world of today” (Sims, 2003)

They weren’t taught how to act in new organizational structures such as matrix structures, project work or task forces (Freimuth et al, 2003)

#### They are demotivated

“They don’t feel recognized” (BCG 2010)

They “are not proactive”, “don’t find their voice” (Sims, 2003) & therefore are “frustrated, disillusioned individuals caught in the middle of a hierarchy.” (Dopson & Stewart, 1990).

“They get lost in the recurring reorganisations and pressure to overwork and ‘presenteeism’.” (Thomas & Lindstead, 2002)

“They are squeezed by demanding superiors & employees.” (Sims, 2003).

#### They slow down progress

They have a „resistance to change and the ways in which they may slow down decision-making (Fenton-O’Creevy, 1996; Dopson & Neumann, 1998).

Middle managers are seen as the “frozen middle”: they block strategic changes and innovations (Accenture, 2007).

### Critical comment on View II

Middle Managers are held responsible for their lack of motivation and their missing key skills. A more balanced view shows the potential that Middle Managers actually have.
### View III on role of Middle Managers

#### Middle Managers as strategy implementers
Middle managers represent long-term interests of the company with high intensity (Mintzberg 2009).

> “What makes them unique is their access to top management coupled with their knowledge of operations. This enables them to function as mediators between the organization’s strategy and day-to-day activities” (Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd, 2008)

#### Middle Managers as change agents
“Middle managers are agents for changing the organisation’s ‘self-renewal process’ because they are able to eliminate the ‘noise fluctuation and chaos within an organization’.” (Nonaka, 1988)

They are entrepreneurs, communicators, therapists and tightrope walkers in one and dose changes up- and downwards regarding feasibility and reasonable consequences (Huy 2002)

#### They are eager to learn
If Middle Managers don’t need to defend their existence any longer and have a clear role description instead, they are willing to learn.

Middle Managers’ organizational commitment raises when there is no career progression (Osterman 2009).

> “Communication and presentation skills are raised by middle managers as an important area for development” (Armstrong & Russell 2012)

#### They need a certain learning environment
“Informal development experiences are perceived as being more effective than formal development experiences.” (Armstrong & Russell 2012)

The most helpful learning measures are (Armstrong & Russell 2012):
- Stimulated on-the-job development experiences
- external short courses
- peer discussions and support

### Critical comment on View III
Middle Managers have the potential to live up to the required role but they need to be mobilized and enabled.
Selected Literature

— In Praise of Middle Managers. Quy Nguyen Huy (2009)

— Leading from the middle – The journey from middle management to middle leadership. Koen Marichal, Jesse Segers (2000)

— Stuck in the Middle – Anforderungen an das mittlere Management in Veränderungsprozessen. Dr. Tanja Philippeit (2009)

— The Truth About Middle Managers. Paul Osterman (2009)


— The Missing Middle – Exploring Learning Experiences of Middle Managers in UK. Amy Armstrong & Ayiesha Russell (2012)