Leading From The Middle

Idea In Short

Leadership doesn't always come from the top. In some organizations, leadership must emerge from the middle, especially when senior management is divided, lacks direction, or is preoccupied with other priorities. Middle managers often find themselves leading initiatives or entire teams because senior leadership is either absent or not fully committed to driving change. This article outlines how middle managers can successfully lead in such circumstances.

In certain organizations, leadership from the top fails for a variety of reasons. It could be due to disagreements among the board members, a misalignment between the board and the executive team, or a lack of competence at the senior levels. In some cases, initiatives are not deemed important enough for top-level leadership to invest time and resources.

As a result, the responsibility to lead falls to those in the middle of the hierarchy—senior and junior middle managers. They are the ones who provide the drive needed to keep the organization functioning and moving forward, even though their efforts may not always match what could be achieved with strong leadership from the top.

Four Key Principles for Leading from the Middle

To successfully lead from the middle, there are four fundamental principles middle managers should follow:

1. Understand and Exercise Your Authority
2. Build Alliances Around Good Ideas
3. Cultivate a Network and Find a Mentor, and
4. Create Your Own power

Understand and Exercise Your Authority

Middle managers are usually granted specific levels of authority by senior executives to help with governance. This authority may cover things like operational budgets, staff numbers, and hiring decisions. It's crucial to know exactly what these limits are and where you can push for more when necessary.

When managing your team or a department, it's essential to exercise your authority when needed. If you have clear authority to make decisions, use it, even if your bosses or other senior leaders disagree with you. Of course, this must be done within reason and without exposing the organization to unnecessary risk. If you make serious mistakes, senior leaders may revoke your authority, but in the majority of cases, taking ownership of decisions is expected from middle managers.

Always inform your superiors when making significant decisions within your limits, and consult them if you need to go beyond your authority. It's important to seek advice, but the final decision should be yours to make.

Build Alliances Around Good Ideas

In any organization, good ideas often transcend office politics. If an idea is beneficial, it will gain traction, regardless of its origin. The best ideas are those that make people's lives easier. They save time, reduce costs, or even generate additional revenue. Sometimes, ideas that reduce risks can be valuable, but this is often understood only after the risks have become apparent.

To create good ideas, you need to involve others. Organize brainstorming sessions with experienced team members to discuss the barriers to achieving a goal. A "negative brainstorming" session, where the goal is to list all the reasons why something can't work, can help identify potential issues and solutions.

Once you've identified the problems, use tools like a five-whys analysis to get to the root cause and develop a clear problem definition. A Force Field analysis can help you identify and eliminate the blockers that prevent solutions from being implemented. By focusing on removing obstacles, you can move closer to a successful idea that benefits the organization.

Cultivate a Network and Find a Mentor

One of the most important strategies for leading from the middle is to build a network. Take time to get to know your staff, colleagues, and bosses. Networking with others in your industry is also valuable. Having a solid network means you can access ideas, inspiration, and mentorship when needed.

Mentorship is especially important. Leading from the middle can be mentally and emotionally exhausting, and you'll need someone to confide in without the fear of judgment. A good mentor offers a safe space to express your thoughts and feelings while providing guidance based on experience.

When choosing a mentor, trust is the first requirement. Your mentor should be someone who listens well and asks insightful questions. Ideally, they should also have experience in your area of responsibility. However, even if they lack specific knowledge, the mentorship can still be valuable if they possess strong listening and questioning skills.

Create Your Own Power

Power doesn't only come from a title or position. Middle managers should work to develop other sources of influence. Here are four ways to build power without relying solely on your position:

Expert Power

Become an expert in something that's relevant to your organization. This could be knowledge of the market, financial breakdowns, IT infrastructure, or government regulations. By becoming the go-to person for specific knowledge, you gain influence and can provide valuable insights to the organization.

Information Power

Use your network to become the person others turn to for information. This doesn't mean you need to know everything, but you should be the point of contact for finding what people need. Being well-connected and knowledgeable enhances your power within the organization.

Reward Power

Doing favors for others is a subtle yet powerful way to build influence. By offering help without expecting immediate returns, you create a sense of obligation in others to reciprocate when you need it. These small acts of kindness can go a long way in building relationships and fostering loyalty.

Referent Power

Don't be afraid to share your ideas and vision for the organization. If you can articulate a compelling vision and communicate it clearly, you can gain referent power—power that stems from respect and admiration. Strong communication and a clear roadmap for the future will help you build influence beyond your position.

Summary

The need for middle managers to lead has become more common in recent years. It's not always that senior management has failed; it's often that middle managers are better equipped to lead in the absence of strong top-level leadership. Whether it's because senior management is ineffective or because a key initiative isn't a priority for the executive team, middle managers must step up. By following these four principles—exercising authority, building alliances, cultivating a network and mentor, and creating personal power—middle managers can successfully lead their organizations and initiatives, even without full support from the top.