How Middle Managers Drive Change

Idea In Short

Most transformations fail not because the strategy is wrong but because the layer of managers between the executive suite and the front line never gets the direction, authority or training to carry it out. Give that layer clear decision rights, structured coaching and a direct line to leadership and adoption accelerates. Withhold those things and even a well-designed plan stalls in the same meetings and memos that were supposed to launch it. Executives who want change to stick should stop treating middle managers as a relay station passing instructions downward and start treating them as the operating engine that converts intent into behavior, one team and one decision at a time.

Corporate transformation efforts tend to draw attention toward two groups: the executives who design the strategy and the frontline employees who eventually carry it out. The layer connecting the two, made up of team leads, department heads and unit managers, rarely gets the same scrutiny, even though it decides whether the strategy survives contact with daily operations. These managers understand the strategic reasoning coming from above and the operational limits sitting below it, which puts them in the best position in the organization to convert a broad goal into instructions a team can actually follow. When a plan fails, the cause is usually not a flawed vision but a translation problem and that problem sits squarely with the middle.

The Vantage Point Only Middle Managers Hold

A senior executive sees the destination. A frontline employee sees today's task list. A middle manager sees both and that dual view lets these leaders catch implementation problems long before they surface in a quarterly review. Harvard Business Review has argued that fewer than one in eight corporate transformations produce lasting results and the gap between the seven that fail and the one that succeeds often traces back to whether middle managers were treated as executors of a finished plan or as contributors who helped shape it1.

Middle managers occupy a position no other role in the hierarchy shares. They sit close enough to leadership to grasp why a strategic shift matters, yet close enough to the front line to know which parts of it will not survive contact with an actual production schedule or customer conversation. That proximity to both ends of the organization lets them spot friction points executives miss from a distance and lets them explain, in plain terms a team will accept, why a change is worth the disruption it causes. Gallup research on frontline management found that managers account for roughly 70 percent of the variance in team engagement, meaning the difference between a change initiative that lands and one that stalls often has less to do with the strategy itself than with the person delivering it2.

A striking illustration of this dynamic comes from Funabashiya, a Japanese confectionery firm with more than two centuries of operating history. When the son of the company's Chief Executive Officer [CEO] pushed for aggressive modernization while his father worked to protect long-standing craft traditions, neither side alone could resolve the standoff. The management layer between them became the actual architects of change, spending two decades building compromises that eventually let the firm modernize its production without abandoning the values that made it distinctive in the first place3.

A Two-Decade Case Study in Reconciling Past and Future

Longitudinal research into Funabashiya identified three distinct phases through which its middle managers moved the organization from internal conflict to a shared strategic direction. Each phase depended on the previous one and skipping ahead without letting the earlier stage run its course would likely have collapsed the effort. The phases also clarify why change imposed purely from the top tends to move slower than change carried by people who have already lived through the doubts a team is currently feeling.

From Resistance to Realization

When the modernization push began, the firm's managers split into two camps. Custodians wanted to preserve traditional production methods exactly as they had learned them, while prospectors pushed for new approaches regardless of the disruption involved and the gap between the two groups initially looked unbridgeable. Over time, though, several of the resistant custodians experienced a genuine shift in thinking, coming to see that protecting what they valued actually required some degree of adaptation rather than resistance to it.

This realization forced a personal reconciliation for each manager involved. They had to hold two things at once, an attachment to methods that had defined their careers and a recognition that those same methods would not carry the company forward without modification. Some custodians never made that shift and eventually left the firm, but others gradually became prospectors themselves, having concluded that without some form of modernization, there would be no tradition left worth preserving.

Temporal Socialization Spreads Change Through Trust

Once a subset of custodians converted to supporting the new direction, they carried something no outside consultant or executive memo could offer, credibility with the peers still resisting change. These newly converted managers became informal bridges between the two camps and their influence worked through relationships rather than mandates. A colleague who had voiced the same doubts and reached the other side carries far more persuasive weight than a directive issued from several levels above.

This is the mechanism through which change actually spreads inside most organizations, moving through trusted social ties rather than the formal chain of command. Respected peers who champion a new approach make others more willing to experiment with it and that positive influence tends to replace the coercive pressure that top-down mandates usually rely on. At Funabashiya, the newly converted managers reported that the atmosphere inside the firm grew noticeably more collaborative once this phase took hold, because they were able to draw on an authentic understanding of both perspectives rather than simply repeating executive talking points.

Coalescing Tradition With Innovation

The final phase produced a synthesis that neither camp could have reached on its own, a shared understanding that new methods could protect the firm's core values better than the outdated ones had. Innovation and tradition stopped functioning as opposing forces and started operating as partners in the same strategy. One employee captured the problem the firm had been living with for generations:

> We did not know exactly how we mixed the three types of starch

Standardizing that process did not strip away the craft behind it, it preserved the craft by finally codifying knowledge that had lived only in the memory of a handful of workers. That reframing, standardization as protection rather than as a threat to authenticity, took most of the twenty-year transformation period to become widely accepted and it only happened because managers who had once resisted it were the ones making the case for it.

Why Middle Managers Struggle Without Support

Despite the outsized influence this layer holds over whether change succeeds, most organizations underinvest in preparing it for the role. Leadership frequently assumes middle managers will fall in line with a new direction without ever defining what that support should look like in practice, an assumption that ignores how different leading through disruption is from managing routine operations4.

Without clear direction on what decisions they can make independently and which ones require escalation, managers tend toward the safer option of protecting the status quo rather than proactively pushing a new strategy forward. They become order-takers rather than strategic contributors and that shift undermines both their effectiveness and their own engagement with the transformation they were supposed to be leading. McKinsey's research into middle manager capability building found that this group is frequently the most underinvested layer in the organization, despite functioning as the connective tissue between what leadership decides and what actually happens on the ground5.

Five Ways Organizations Can Equip the Middle

Organizations that want middle managers to act as engines of change rather than passive relays tend to invest in five specific areas. None of these require restructuring the organization, but each requires deliberate attention rather than an assumption that managers will figure it out on their own.

1. Define the role clearly, spelling out how managers should communicate updates, handle resistance and monitor adoption, along with exactly which decisions they can make without escalation
2. Invest in dedicated change management training that covers communication techniques, resistance handling and coaching methods, since operational management skills alone rarely transfer to leading through disruption

3. Ensure senior leadership stays genuinely engaged, giving managers direct access to decision-makers and treating their concerns as useful intelligence rather than resistance to be managed away
4. Build two-way feedback channels, using regular surveys, skip-level conversations and focus groups so that implementation challenges travel upward and strategic rationale travels downward without distortion
5. Recognize and reward change leadership explicitly, through performance evaluations, public acknowledgment and career development, so that driving adoption reads as a path toward advancement rather than an unrewarded burden

When leadership follows through on the third point in particular, both the strategy and the managers benefit. Middle managers often notice practical obstacles that executives, working from a strategic distance, never see and treating those observations as valuable input rather than pushback produces a stronger plan and a more engaged management layer at the same time. MIT Sloan Management Review has argued that strategy works best as an iterative loop of sensing, choosing, executing and revising rather than a linear document handed down once and middle managers are the people positioned to feed real-time information back into that loop6.

What Middle Managers Can Do Regardless of Support

Even when organizational support falls short, middle managers can take steps on their own to improve the odds that a strategy takes hold. Before implementing any directive, they can ask direct questions about what problem the strategy solves, how success will be measured and where flexibility exists to adapt the plan to local conditions. Surfacing the gap between strategic intent and operational reality early and doing so constructively, helps refine a plan before it turns into a costly failure further down the line.

Building genuine buy-in also depends on translating an abstract directive into something specific to a person's daily work. Telling a team the company is pursuing a broad digital transformation lands very differently than explaining that a new system will eliminate the manual data entry that has frustrated them for months. People resist change less once they understand what it changes for them personally and celebrating incremental progress along the way keeps that understanding reinforced rather than forgotten after the initial announcement.

Managers also need to protect their own capacity for this work, since the operational demands of the job rarely disappear just because a transformation has begun. Delegating tasks that do not require specialized expertise and reserving time for reflection rather than staying in constant reactive mode, frees up the bandwidth that leading a change initiative actually requires. Leveraging informal networks matters just as much, since the employees with the most influence over peer opinion rarely hold formal titles and securing their early support tends to move a team faster than any official announcement.

Middle managers are not intermediaries who simply relay messages between executives and employees. They function as architects of organizational change, building relationships, mediating conflict and adapting a plan as new information arrives. When this layer is not genuinely on board, even a well-designed strategy stalls, adoption falters and momentum fades long before the transformation reaches its intended destination.

- 1Middle Managers Should Drive Your Business Transformation
- 2How To Engage Frontline Managers
- 3When Top Managers' Temporal Orientations Collide: Middle Managers And The Strategic Use Of The Past
- 4How To Help Middle Managers Succeed
- 5Activating Middle Managers Through Capability Building
- 6Closing The Gap Between Strategy And Execution

Summary

Middle managers are not passive conduits between strategy and the shop floor. They interpret, adapt and personally vouch for change in ways no executive memo can replicate and a two-decade case study of a Japanese confectionery firm shows how that process unfolds in three distinct phases, from initial resistance through peer-led persuasion to a genuine synthesis of old values and new methods. Organizations that define these managers' roles clearly, train them deliberately and reward their contribution convert good strategy into durable results. Those that leave the middle unsupported watch strong plans die in the layer meant to carry them forward.