

# Re-defining Middle Management



*...a better way to manage*

the  
**happy**  
manager

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# HOW TO BE A BETTER MANAGER

## Re-defining Middle Management

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## How to be a Better Manager...

**Re-defining Middle Management** is one of a series of practical, thought-provoking guides, designed to help you deal with a wide range of management ideas, activities and situations. Whether you are a new manager, or one who wants to hone or develop existing skills, we're sure you'll find something valuable in any of these guides.

This series of e-guides is published by Apex Leadership Ltd. The guides have been developed by a team of professional managers, consultants and educators. The full range of titles is available from [Apex Leadership Ltd](#), or from [the Happy Manager.com](#). Use these guides to benefit from our wealth of management expertise. Let us help you find: **a better way to manage...**"

Phil Higson & Anthony Sturgess  
Directors, Apex Leadership Ltd

### Using the guides

Each guide contains information, insight and inspiration on essential management topics. The best way to use the guides is to read through each section in turn, ensuring you pause for reflection wherever you see the "Consider..." points. Be sure to answer any questions posed, wherever they appear - they are there for a reason!

**Consider ...**

**Tools ...**

After you've worked through the guide, work through the tools. These have been designed to help you use and develop the advice given in the guide.

- Click on the tool buttons where they appear for an in-text hyperlink to the actual tool.
- At the end of each tool you can simply click on the "return" link to get back to your place in the guide.

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### The middle introduced

#### Re-defining the Role of Middle Managers

Middle managers have received a bad press. Several surveys point to difficulties in the “middle” of an organisation. In the midst of questions about the effectiveness of middle managers, and cost reduction restructures that inevitably hit the middle hardest, perhaps the middle manager is on borrowed time? Alternatively, have we created an impossible job for our middle managers, at the same time discouraging innovation and knowledge creation?

This guide proposes a re-think of the way we view the middle manager’s role. Rather than viewing them in the “middle”, this view puts middle managers at the creative **heart** of the organisation.

#### This guide will help you to:

- Review the pressures and difficulties of the middle manager role.
- Identify the strengths of middle managers.
- Explore a different emphasis on middle management.
- Develop the critical middle manager’s role at the heart of an organisation.

A good place to start is to think about two things. Firstly, what we mean by managing, and secondly, what we mean by the middle.

### Managing in the middle

#### Just managing

The very word managing can have negative or unhelpful connotations in the way we use it. Asked the question: “how are you managing?” what the questioner means normally is how are you coping? The word “managing” is sometimes associated with coping, just about keeping your head above the water. Often in organisations that’s how it feels.

In an environment where the way we manage is changing, it’s appropriate to think about the question: what does it mean to manage? One dictionary definition for “manage” is to “to survive despite difficulties”. For many of us and our organisations, that’s perhaps not far from the truth!

Just managing can also mean that’s all you do - in other words, managing is a job in itself (and that is often the role of a middle manager).

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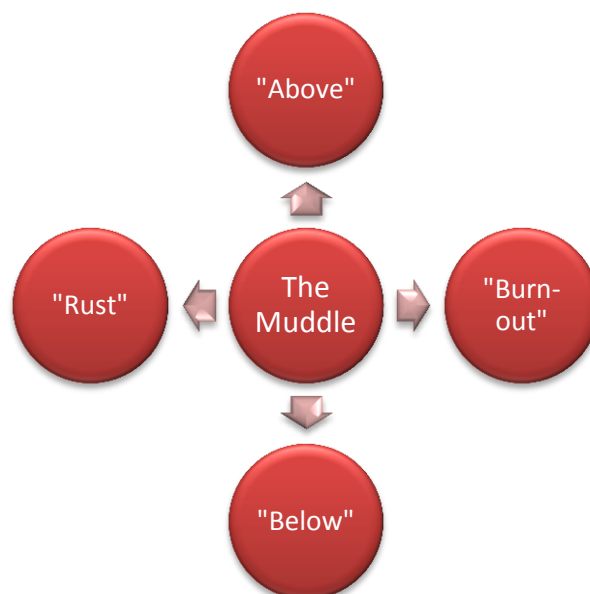
### The entrenched muddle

For whatever reason, some managers can feel as though they are stuck in the middle of the organisation. Allowing such important people to develop or retain these feelings can lead to an entrenched muddle. This can be every bit as damaging as allowing an unchecked, expanding muddle.

There are contrasting reasons to explain this issue. Firstly, middle managers can feel pressured and frustrated. They may feel caught in the middle, between what is happening above or below them in the organisation. However, they can also suffer badly from being in the middle from another perspective: the middle of the rust-to-burn-out continuum.

It's often thought that job burn-out is a result of overwork. Middle managers might argue that the pressures of their role can make them particularly susceptible to such a circumstance. However, some thinkers argue that burn-out is not usually due to *simply* having too much to do. The *type and nature* of the work can contribute just as significantly to a manager's stress and pressure.

This may not be unique to middle managers but it can be especially problematic where it relates to their unique position. For example, when they are charged with doing things they either don't believe in, or haven't been a part of deciding or creating. Ultimately job burn-out can result, with all of the well-known outcomes. A burnt-out manager will lack drive, energy, initiative, creativity, resilience and optimism. In other words, they will become entrenched in the middle.



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### Managing tensions

In contrast to what goes on in the middle, middle managers should be the powerhouse of an organisation. They should be the embodiment of what has come to be known as the "knowledge worker". Not the relay, simply passing information back and forth.

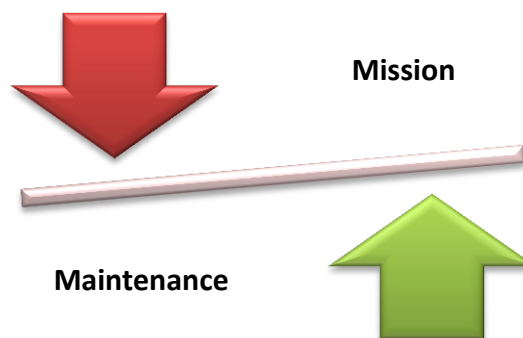
There is a complexity about today's organisations which causes a range of tensions. These reflect the issues associated with the uncertainty and unpredictability of the modern business climate. Tensions such as:

- Continuity verses change - balancing the need for change with the benefits of continuity.
- Visions versus reality.
- Strategy versus practicality.
- Ambiguity verses clarity.
- Abundance verses scarcity.
- Rust verses burn-out - the waste of potential not being utilised, the waste of people being over-worked and burned out.
- Doing more with less.

Alongside these varying pressures there is one primary tension that middle managers have to hold. That is the tension between maintaining current performance and managing change to improve - between maintenance and mission.

### Managing for maintenance and mission

Middle management is a balancing act. Arguably, the two most crucial elements to balance are maintenance and mission.



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## Tool 1: Diagnosing middle management issues

What areas do middle managers in your organisation most struggle with? This tool provides you with some prompts and questions to start identifying issues, then possible actions to take.

Challenges/issues	Comments
<p>How has downsizing and delayering affected you? For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coping with increasing demands and fewer middle managers.</li> <li>• Losing extensive tacit knowledge.</li> <li>• Increasing uncertainty to navigate an organisation through change</li> <li>• Reduced job security</li> <li>• Commitment issues to the organisation</li> </ul>	
<p>What do middle managers do in your organisation? (Where and how do they add value?)</p>	
<p>How is the role changing. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing people who know far more about the tasks and activities for which the manager has ultimate responsibility.</li> <li>• Some middle managers don't manage people at all, they manage projects, activities and initiatives.</li> <li>• Organisational structures are changing, more flexible working in matrix structures, or across functional boundaries or across organisational boundaries.</li> </ul>	
<p>What is stopping middle managers from being effective?</p>	

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Conducting a Performance Review  
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Motivating Performance

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