

MIDDLE MANAGERS: YOUR SECRET WEAPON FOR ENGAGING EMPLOYEES

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As the punch line of jokes in comic strips, tv shows, movies and employee happy hours across the country, middle managers have a tough job, though few employees or senior executives would likely agree. From an outside perspective, middle management can seem like the ultimate “cushy” job. To employees, it appears middle managers are shielded from the day-to-day grind of direct internal and external customer contact. To senior executives, middle managers don't have to face the intense scrutiny of the C-suite and board of directors regarding financial and productivity measures.

Much responsibility

In reality, middle managers themselves often feel like they are stuck between a rock and a hard place. They frequently have many duties and responsibilities, but very little authority. On any given day, a middle manager could be conducting interviews with job candidates, holding a performance review with a current employee, helping deal with a customer crisis, filling in for an employee who is out of the office, training in new employees, completing budget planning, consulting with other departments on cross-functional projects, meeting with senior management on a strategic initiative, meeting with unhappy employees, serving on special project committees, attending training for themselves, meeting with customers, approving orders, researching new equipment and supplies...the list goes on and on.

Little authority

However, when decisions need to be made, they often don't have the autonomy to act alone. Scheduling time with their bosses to get approvals can take weeks, leaving employees unhappy that it “takes forever to get anything done around here.” This creates distrust between middle managers and their employees—something that good managers work very hard to avoid.

Changing landscape

In addition to their myriad of duties, managers are also increasingly stymied by the rapidly changing diversity in their direct reports. Many supervise employees covering four generations ranging in age from 18 to 80. Others supervise new immigrants who may need guidance in business cultural norms. Some are now responsible for a change in traditional gender roles as more men go into fields such as nursing and women take on jobs such as construction.

Always something more

Whenever a new employee initiative is launched, it frequently falls to middle management to communicate to employees and ultimately provide administrative support. These initiatives can include changes in policy, new processes and procedures, wellness programs, productivity programs and even recognition programs.

Essential secret weapons

Overwhelmed and often disrespected, middle managers are in fact a company's secret weapon for turning top-line strategy into day-to-day action by workers. According to Ethan Mollick, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's renowned Wharton Business School, "middle managers play a key role in fostering innovative and creative environments."

Mollick explains that while every organization needs employees who are creative and innovative, they also need middle managers who have the skill sets to put these ideas into action -- how to direct a project, secure resources, facilitate progress and communicate with key stakeholders -- all while keeping their entire teams excited, engaged and motivated to do more. Good middle managers have those critical skills.

Recognition matters

Successful middle managers keep their teams innovating and creating by using recognition. When effectively recognizing employees with praise that is timely, specific, sincere and positive, managers:

- **Create a "line of sight" for the organization's mission and values.**

According to Rosabeth Moss Kanter, a leading expert in motivation and recognition: "Recognition creates role models and heroes and communicates standards. It says: these are the kinds of things that are valued here."

- **Build loyalty that leads to improved retention.**

Studies conducted in all industries and in companies both large and small consistently show that employees choose to stay with an organization that makes it a point to communicate the simple message: "You matter."

- **Motivate and drive increased performance.**

Most workers find a "comfort zone" of acceptable performance. Knowing they will be recognized for their improved performance pushes employees to strive for the next level.

- **Improve morale and employee attitudes.**

Recognition creates a positive work environment. Attitudes spread quickly. Inspired and energized employees serve as unassailable role models to co-workers.

- **Enhance productivity.**

Employees who are recognized regularly work smarter and more effectively. They better understand what is expected and will work diligently to meet or exceed those expectations.

Getting Middle Managers on Board

Convincing middle managers to take on yet another responsibility can be a challenge. It's important to help them understand how establishing a culture of recognition within their own teams or departments will ultimately make their jobs easier. This can be a tough sell for managers who don't understand how effective recognition builds strong relationships that have a direct impact on their personal success.

It's imperative that managers realize how recognition:

- **Creates open lines of communication** between themselves and their employees to keep managers from being caught unaware of problems.
- **Builds a positive environment** that encourages collaboration and sharing so managers can more effectively delegate some of their responsibilities to their employees.

- **Helps managers discover those key employees** who are ready to begin their own leadership journey.
- **Showcases their own talents** to senior management by having a highly functional team that consistently meets its goals and objectives.

If you already have an employee recognition program in place or if you are considering launching one, be sure your strategic plan includes distinct communications, training and support tactics to gain middle management commitment. Here are some things you'll want to include in your strategic recognition plan:

- ✓ **Middle management input**
Invite middle managers to share what they need from a recognition program as you create the program design – they will have unique and targeted insights to share.
- ✓ **Middle management evaluation**
Ask middle managers to do a “sanity” check on your program design—will it work for them? What obstacles do they see? How could things be done differently to make the program easier for them to utilize?
- ✓ **Middle management training**
Conduct specific training for middle managers on exactly how the program will benefit them. Be sure managers know specifically how the program works and how to utilize all of the program tools. Employees will come to their manager for help or to ask questions on how to participate. If managers can't quickly answer these questions, employees will likely not participate and managers will avoid using the program as well.
- ✓ **Middle management communications**
Middle managers are busy and using a recognition program is just one more thing they have to remember to do. Keep reminding them about the program and how it benefits them on an ongoing basis. Share results and best practices. Provide tips and strategies on how to integrate recognition into the activities they are already doing.
- ✓ **Middle management component**
Include a special middle management aspect to the program. Senior executives should be measured on how well they recognize their middle management direct reports. Have special rewards for middle managers only. Always encourage employees to recognize their managers for good work too.

Effective middle management is crucial to every organization's success. By fostering the best in their employees using recognition as a key engagement tool, middle managers can have a dramatic impact on the vitality and sustainability of a company.

BI WORLDWIDE is a global leader in helping organizations build recognition systems that harness the power of middle management. We use the latest technology and behavioral economics theories to create programs that help organizations meet their strategic business goals.

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Our leading recognition solution, **G5, is the most advanced social recognition system ever.** G5 has been specifically designed to deliver behavior change to achieve our customers' engagement objectives.

This highly-advanced system incorporates forward-thinking technology with industry best practices that makes it:

- **Accessible** to any user, anywhere, using any device.
- **App-driven** to support a wide range of employee engagement initiatives.
- **Socially-adaptable** to integrate program messages into social networks including Facebook®, Twitter® and LinkedIn®.
- **Playful** offering a gamification app utilizing popular badging systems.
- **Personally-focused** using our patent-pending recognition PURL™ (personalized URL) app to celebrate employee achievements in a social networking environment and our proprietary U Draw It™ app to create personalized eCards.
- **Globally responsive** with BIW offices in Australia, Canada, China, India, Latin America, United Kingdom and the United States.
- **Data-driven** focusing on benchmarking and providing actionable data to help improve program results.

To learn more about **BIWORLDWIDE** and G5, visit: BIWORLDWIDE.com/G5
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