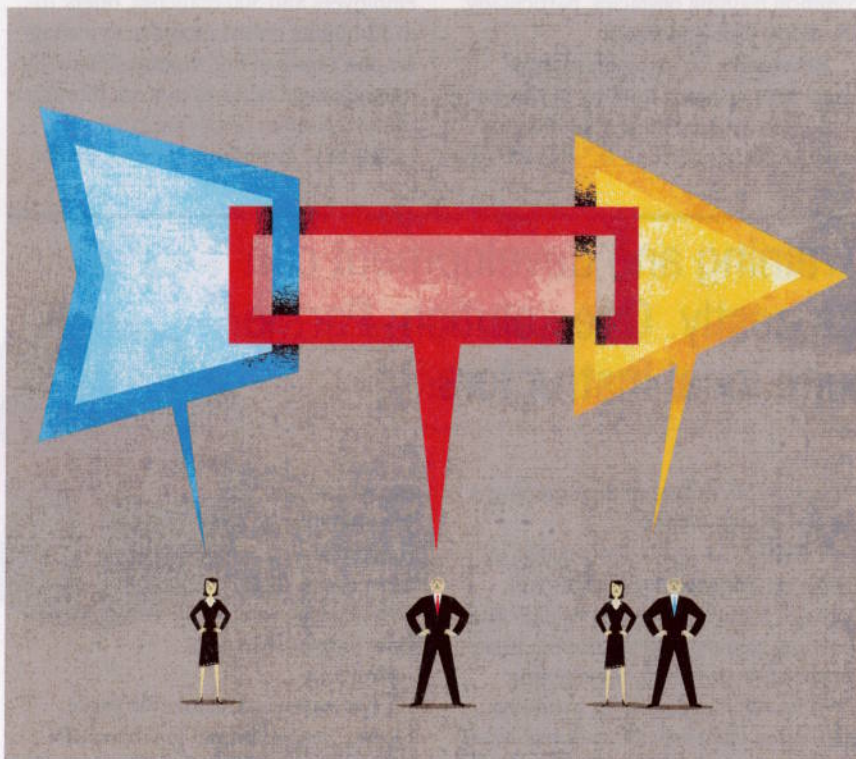


The Strongest Link

Support middle managers' ability to focus on direct reports, executives and colleagues.



By Kathryn Tyler

Deb Williams highly values the monthly training Elkhart General Hospital offers to middle managers. At the acute-care 300-bed hospital with 2,300 employees in Elkhart, Ind., she's the manager of respiratory care. One of the sessions she found most useful was about dealing with difficult employees.

"You find you are not alone," she says. "I was able to take information back and put it into immediate use."

Williams represents one of the most crucial, yet underappreciated, segments of the workforce: the middle manager. Long neglected and squeezed by expectations from the top and bottom, these important people are rising to the forefront as linchpins that hold together customer-facing employees and upper executives.

"Middle managers are the link between your mission and execution," says Kurt Meyer, vice president of HR and support services for Elkhart General Hospital. "They turn our strategy into action and get everyone on the same page."

Tom Davenport, senior practitioner in the San Francisco office of global HR

consulting firm Towers Watson and co-author of *Manager Redefined* (Towers Watson, 2010), agrees. Often, "managers in the middle are treated as if they are superfluous. But that isn't the case. Directly and indirectly, the supervisor-employee relationship makes a lot of difference" in employee engagement and retention, he says.

Curtis Powell, vice president of HR for Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y., says middle managers connect the dots for front-line employees. "A well-trained middle manager who is capable of clearly articulating the vision and mission of the organization and is capable of clarifying the strategies of the organization's top leaders will minimize the 'us vs. them' mentality and improve the overall morale and satisfaction of the workgroup," he explains.

How can HR professionals support middle managers, and what type of training is needed? HR professionals should:

- Address the needs of new and veteran managers.
- Reduce barriers to training.
- Create opportunities for middle managers to network with one another and learn about different aspects of the organization.

Tailor Training

"People leave managers, not companies," advises Alexis Balkum, SPHR, vice president of learning and development for Turner Broadcasting System (TBS) in Atlanta. "Position those managers for success and you'll be better positioned to retain your employees."

But first HR professionals must

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understand the diverse needs within the management population. New managers and veteran managers have different skills gaps, for instance.

The historical model of simply promoting a front-line employee into a supervisory role without providing appropriate preparatory training is no longer prudent, Powell warns.

Statistics show that, without training, middle managers new to their roles aren't successful at transitioning from subject matter experts to people managers, Balkum adds. Hence, TBS "recently built a more comprehensive, seven-month program around two components: understanding the policies and procedures around managing a team, and leadership skills to help them achieve their business goals," she says.

The Management Essentials program combines webinars, classroom training and e-learning. It covers the life cycle of an employee, hiring, performance management, company policies and procedures, delegating, time management, transitioning from an individual subject matter contributor to a people manager, team development, and resolving interpersonal conflict. The program also provides opportunities for managers to connect with their peers.

TBS piloted the program in February 2010. The first class graduated in November. New managers are required to complete the program; this year, the company plans to adapt it for veteran managers.

The University of Texas Medical Branch, in Galveston, also tailors training offerings to the needs of three management populations: new managers, veterans and those who supervise middle managers, says Douglas G. Stark, director of organizational and workforce development.

The university's Emerging Leader Program serves individuals who have little experience in leadership and focuses on communication and team building. "We have modules on giving and receiving constructive feedback, emotional intelligence, and building relationships," Stark says.

A Leader Orientation course for veteran managers covers hiring, coaching, recognition, discipline, communication

and delegation. "Many middle managers have knowledge of these issues but got little guidance on how to do them," Stark says.

The Manager Certification course is for individuals who lead other leaders. That course focuses on getting things done through multiple levels while engaging the staff.

Overcoming Obstacles

Once HR professionals understand their target populations, they must overcome common training obstacles, particularly relevance, time and funds.

Relevance. "If an organizational leader says he needs training in X, what he is really looking for is a solution to some problem related to X," Powell says.

Training and development can be costly. One solution: Partner with local instructors.

"It is your job to determine if training is the appropriate remedy."

Training can only improve gaps in employee knowledge and skills and, perhaps, influence attitude, he explains. Training cannot address resource issues or workflow problems, for example.

"Usually the request for a training class is not what we end up doing. Many times, we work with the group to clearly define roles and processes first," Stark says.

Time. "With all of their other priorities, getting managers to spend time on their own development is difficult," Meyer says.

When and how training occurs makes a difference. For example, every quarter Scottrade, an online brokerage firm, flies 20 to 25 managers to the company's St.

Louis headquarters for the three-day Achieving Manager course. Topics include personal attitudes, power management, communication style, manager involvement and interpersonal relationships. New managers attend within 60 to 90 days after promotion to a management position, and veteran managers cycle through every three or four years. The course became mandatory two years ago, says Mike Jacobs, director of training.

In addition, Scottrade, with 3,400 employees and 500 branches, offers 10- to 12-minute online modules so managers don't have to find blocks of 60 to 90 uninterrupted minutes to work through a training course, Jacobs explains.

Money. Training and development

can be costly if you use outside consultants, Meyer says. One cost-effective solution: Partner with local instructors.

For example, Lincoln Financial Group, headquartered in Radnor, Pa., launched its middle management training in 2009—the middle of the recession. The company partnered with the University of Pennsylvania's nearby Wharton School to develop courses for middle managers. The courses cover project management, presentation skills, business leadership and coaching. The result was a huge increase in the number of learning opportunities: 1,300 in 2009 vs. fewer than 200 in 2007.

Lincoln's leaders asked, "What can we do to make the workplace experience even better during a tough time?" The response to learning and development was critical," recalls Lisa Buckingham, chief HR officer.

Davenport advises HR professionals to use training dollars to help middle

Online Resources

For additional information about training middle managers, see the online version of this article at www.shrm.org/hmagazine/0211TrainingAgenda.

managers with performance management and navigation of their organizations.

Peer Support

Networking is one of the most effective outcomes of training—and it is inexpensive. Middle managers crave the empathy, camaraderie and “been there” solutions offered by their peers. An example: A Silicon Valley technology company’s leaders asked managers, “‘What would make your job easier and better?’ The No. 1 thing they said was ‘More connections with other parts of the company to build skills,’” Davenport says. “Let managers connect.”

HR professionals can foster opportunities for discussions between managers. The venues may be as simple as regularly scheduled brown bag lunches with rotating topics or as sophisticated as catered question-and-answer lunches with formal executive panels.

“I appreciate the opportunity to listen to other managers and hear their challenges and how they worked through them to reach positive outcomes,” says Alison Gratzol, manager of the center for cancer care at Elkhart General Hospital.

Her employer focuses managers’ training on leadership, mentoring and understanding different perspectives. At the hospital’s Leadership Academy, hospital leaders teach middle managers about business topics. In the Day in the Life mentoring program, “each manager spends two to four hours with an internal customer or key stakeholder,” Meyer explains. “We have had very positive feedback.”

At TBS, middle managers take online courses and discuss them. “People love to share their learning across the organization,” Balkum says. “The opportunity to learn from others is really effective.”

Davenport notes that better managers spend less time on administrative tasks

and more time engaging people, brainstorming with employees about how to improve processes, networking and learning new things.

Full Plates

“When budgets are being cut, the tendency in some organizations is to reduce training and professional development,” Powell says. “Ironically, it is during these times of tribulation that the knowledge and skills available for middle managers is crucial.”

When managers are pulled in many directions, they risk losing their effectiveness, Meyer says: “People tend to cut corners in order to survive. We need them balanced and healthy or our gains will diminish.”

Middle managers are the key to employee engagement, retention, satisfaction and productivity. One of the most crucial tasks for HR professionals, then, is to support middle managers and keep them energized. ■

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