Managing in the Middle

A presentation by

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Synopsis by Rod Cox

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"*In nearly every organization, Tops and Workers are at odds over any number of fundamental issues: whether the system itself is legitimate or illegitimate: whether its rules, structures and procedures should be maintained or changed; whether change -- if there is to be any -- should be gradual or dramatic; what it is to have an equitable distribution of system resources and who should decide that; how particular crisis situations should be handled; and so on.*

In the midst of these issues are the Middles, on the one hand responsible for managing the work of the system, and on the other caught up in an endless series of disputes between Tops and Workers. They are pushed and pulled and subjected to a variety of pressures from Tops and Workers who may:

- *attempt to enlist their support and assure their loyalty on any number of issues*
- *try to use Middles as extensions of themselves -- as spokespersons, messengers, mediators*
- *try to use Middles to buffer themselves against intrusions or confrontations*
- *try to win Middles over to their positions through rational debate or by menacing them, cajoling them, co-opting them, or drawing on their sympathies.*

This then is the condition of Middleness, focused and sharpened."

Middles tend to be seen by others in the system as well-meaning and hard working, yet uninformed and wishy-washy, agents of The Top or The Workers, inconsistent, weak, incompetent, powerless, and unable or unwilling to make important decisions on their own. And yet Middles are absolutely critical in assuring that the goals of the organization are realized.

Clearly, being in the middle is a difficult place. Often maligned by others, Middleness happens whenever initiatives from the Tops have a great impact on life at the bottom. Middles are the connectors between the two, charged with seeing that the initiatives of the Tops are carried out while being pressured by The Workers who may see these directives as being ill-thought and likely to negatively impact their work experience.

In his mind-opening Portland presentation, Barry Oshry discussed the dilemma of being in the Middle, and offered practical suggestions for converting Middleness into a position of organizational power. This synopsis also pulls extensively from his book *In the Middle*, available through the Management Forum Series archival link at www.executiveforum.com.

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Barry Oshry, Ph. D. is President of Power & Systems, a Boston-based firm noted for increasing the power of organizations. He has served on the faculties of Boston College and Boston University where he was Chairman of the Department of Organizational Studies. Oshry is the author of practical, forward-thinking books that help organizations be more productive and effective. Besides *In the Middle*, his books include *Seeing Systems: Unlocking the Mysteries Of Organizational Life*, and *Leading Systems: Lessons From the Power Lab*. Oshry and his wife and collaborator, Karen, often use simulation exercises to help people understand the importance of well-working organizational systems, and how to fix them when they're broken.

W ithin every organizational system there are three primary levels of influence -- Top, Middle, and Worker. Each has a power which can be leveraged to enhance the capacity of the whole system to develop and survive.

- Tops are charged with **shaping** the entire operation. They manage a system's overall form. They identify dangers and untapped opportunities, often reshaping the organization and sometimes overhauling it. Tops exist in an environment that is more complicated than that of Workers or Middles; more varied, more challenging and more unpredictable.

- Workers **produce** the system's products and render its services. They use their closeness to work and their familiarity with work processes and production to enhance the system's capacity to cope. Workers exist in an environment that is more threatening than that of Tops or Middles; more individually vulnerable, lowest in pay and benefits, and often more expendable in hard times.

- Middles -- those who service and manage the various system parts -- are in the best position to **integrate** the organization. They carry *local* functions by servicing or managing particular system parts or units. Middles exist in an environment that is more diffusing than that of the Tops or Workers; often pulled back and forth (torn) between those they service or manage, often isolated, and often spending their time in other people's territories.

- Middles carry systemic functions by collectively integrating the varied systems. They can enhance the transfer of information, influence synchrony and consistency, and help Tops and Workers adjust to each other's requirements.

Note that each of these layers of power, when properly implemented, need not detract from the others. In fact, no layer can perform its function without the cooperation of the other two. But each layer also has its unique dilemmas which, when not resolved, can keep the power potential of the system from being tapped.

The Middle Dilemma

Unfortunately, not many Middles discover and use their unique system power. More often than not, they see themselves solely as the Servicers of their local function. They manage specific units, performing independently, ignoring their vital role as System Integrators.

1. Middles tend to be involved in a hectic pace, working long and hard. In contrast to Tops and Workers, Middles seem to be in perpetual motion, carrying with them never-ending lists of meetings to attend, items to accomplish, errands to run, unfinished paperwork to edit, business transacted on the run, constant intrusions, and so on.

2. Middles are prone to deflated egos, often receiving little support or gratitude up or down, feeling incompetent, seldom seeing satisfying results, and working hard but pleasing no one.

3. Middles tend to be a bit confused by their role. Upward and downward demands may leave them without a position of their own, ambivalent as they try to respond to both Tops and Workers. They often assume compromise positions that please no one, not even themselves.

4. Middles may have difficulty seeing themselves as "significant" in a system where the action seems to lie with Tops and Workers. As invisible conciliators rather than strategists or implementers, they may be heavily burdened yet not accomplished.

5. Very often, Middles are isolated and lonely, accepted by neither Tops or Workers, separated from their peers by focus and work unit. They often silently harbor interpersonal tension and competitive anxieties with respect to their peers.

6. Initiation, independent thought and action are seldom the provinces of Middles. They are more inclined to react to the situations, strategies and actions of Tops and Workers.

7. Middles tend to personalize their experiences. When a situation goes badly, it's because of their own failure, their lack of skill, their low intelligence, their lack of competence, their lack of character.

Middles as Diffusers and Integrators

Diffusing and integrating functions are essential elements of Middleness. They strengthen each other. Both are critical for the organizaton.

Diffusion refers to the inward and outward flows of function and data that effect good decisions and actions. When they are operating as diffusers, Middles distribute out to the system the "essence" of the units they service or manage, and bring into the units the "essence" of the organization. Separated from each other, they influence local (unit) responsibilities and gather data about what is happening in their arenas. Thus, they are apt to interact frequently with Tops, other Middles, Workers and often clients and vendors. They are in a prime position to influence all of these levels. The contacts and information available to Middles makes them apt see the total system more clearly than do either Tops or Workers.

Most Middles operate nearly exclusively in a diffuse mode. No doubt this is a powerful position, yet when diffusion dynamics are unrecognized and unmanaged, diffusion can lead to dis-integration where groups tend to become isolated.   Middles tend to become overwhelmed by conflicting possibilities. Workers and Tops often negatively view the role of Middles, and production suffers. For diffusion to work well, it needs to be partnered with integration.

The integrating group is a collection of peers within a system: line supervisors, staff specialists, store managers, department chairpersons, school principals, senior managers, and so forth. They integrate by connecting and integrating with each other, and by bringing the fruits of their collaboration back to their work units as well as to the organization as a whole.

Integration provides for a collective space that increases harmony with other Middles (Tops, too) thereby contributing systemically to the organization's broader interests.   Said another way, integration is a function of Middles venturing outside their unit obligations to connect as collaborative, systemically-focused peers. Few organizations or Middles operate here – perhaps few have considered it – yet it is in this integrative space that Middles often find their true power.

When Middles are in an integrating phase:

- they meet with one another, excluding all others including their bosses. Meetings with bosses tend to heighten competitiveness, suppress openness and promote dependence.
- they share the intelligence they have gathered while diffusing throughout the system.
- they may choose to integrate at high or low levels of commitment to each other. The higher the level of integration, the greater potential for individual and system power.
- as they move to higher levels of integration, they find ways to counter feelings that their individual freedom might be constrained. They openly expect support and consistency from their integrative peers.
- they gain strength from both diffusing and integrating. The more strongly they integrate, the more power they have to diffuse their unit servicing and managing functions.

But integration may be difficult when middles are hired and rewarded as individuals, or when Tops are resistant to or wary of independent Middle groups. And when Middles identify themselves more strongly with the units they service than they do the system as a whole, they create their own formidable barriers.

Middles who don't view their problems systemically and fail to integrate tend to lead stressful lives feeling isolated, unsupported, and torn between conflicting demands. They often see themselves as a sewer pipe for two-way garbage transfers between Tops and Workers. They may feel undermined by their peers, and may please no one by trying to please everyone. Regularly, they become caught in a middle space that threatens to pull them apart vertically (between Tops and Workers) and laterally (between customers and producers.)

Mastering the Middle Space: Converting Middleness into Organizational Power

In a nutshell, the process of mastering the middle space is the process of mastering the system.

Rather than focusing on fixing what's wrong with the Middles, they and others in their organizations (principally Tops) need to direct their attention to fixing what's systemically wrong with a space in which generally competent Middles are pulled into becoming stressed, disempowered, and ineffective.

What leverage does seeing things systemically rather than personally hold? It frees Middles up to focus on goals. It increases empathy and understanding by them and to them. It helps them keep from getting hooked by "stuff." It makes them more strategic when they take others' worlds into account. It eases their own condition as it sustains partnership.

To make systemic leverage happen, Middle people need to step up to the line.

If you are a Middle person:

1. **Resist the urge to make other people's problems, issues and conflicts your own.**
Your job is to empower them to resolve their issues, not take responsibility for them.

2. **Keep your own mind.** When your attention is on conflicting information from Above and Below, you are apt to be confused and torn. Learn to pay attention to *your* point-of-view, *your* values, and *your* solutions. Be a middle who stays out of the middle by maintaining your independence of thought and action.

3. **Be a Top whenever you can, and take responsibility for being Top.** Work on the tough issues. Don't pass them to the Top. Tops need to know only those situations that are truly unsolvable at Middle levels. Without asking permission, do what needs to be done, but be willing to ask for forgiveness or take the rap if it turns out poorly.

 4. **Be a Worker when you should, and take the consequences of being on the bottom.**
Bad directives from Tops? Middles are often better positioned to recognize and deal with downward garbage. Deal with it at the Middle level. Don't pass it on to the Workers.

5. **Be a Coach rather than a fixer.** Empathize with their condition and understand their situation -- but don't solve their problems for them. Your job is to work with them and empower them to solve their own problems.

6. **Facilitate solutions by bringing together the people who need to be together,** and helping them have productive interactions. Step out of being the buffer between them.

7. **Integrate with one another.** Cultivate cooperative, collaborative relationships with other Middles. Carefully consider how the decisions you make for your own group will impact your peer's groups. You need the power of strong, interactive peer relationships to reduce alienation and become successful contributors.

System integration can only be done by performing collectively, and Middles are in the best position to do it. Middles are empowered when they function as system Integrators, and they are disempowered when they don't.

We often believe that we don't integrate because of how we feel about each other, but actually the opposite is true: we feel the way we feel about each other because we don't integrate. If we don't understand Middleness, we're at the mercy of it. If we do understand it, we can control it rather than letting it pull us apart.

Learning Applications

1. Think of a time when you were an independent middle even though there were strong pressures not to be independent. What was it like for you? How did your independent acts affect the system?

2.   What are the current roles of Middleness in your organization?

3. Think of an integrating peer network that would make sense to you and your organization. What impact could this network have? What are your first steps toward making it happen?

4. What would happen in your organization if you:

- Created a powerful and compelling mission for integrating Middles?

- Made integration meetings sacred commitments?

- Met withoutTops, but kept them informed? Which Top(s) might be resistant and need to be reassured?

- Included "integration" in job descriptions for Middles?

- Coached and supported one another?

- Held each other accountable for action?

- Rotated leadership of the integration group?