



Managing from the Middle

Summary

Uppers, Middles, and Lower

Individuals are in upper, middle, and lower roles in their work relationships. These are not fixed positions. For example, an individual is in a Middle role while supervising a front line worker. However, the same individual is in a Lower role when in meetings with the organization's upper management. Across a single day, individuals may change roles as they move from task to task or meeting to meeting.

Supervisors spend a lot of time managing from Middle roles in their organization, so understanding these roles is important.

The Nature of Upper, Middle, and Lower Roles

In each organization there are a set of tasks associated with each role (Upper, Middle, Lower). Individuals in the same role also tend to experience that role in some common ways and are viewed by others in some common ways. The tasks, experiences, and opinions of others are captured in Table 1, which appears at the end of this document.

The essence of supervisor and middle management roles is to be in the Middle.

The essential task of an individual in the Middle is to keep the Uppers and the Lower connected.

The experience of those in Middle roles is often one of feeling alone, isolated, disconnected, and torn between Uppers and Lower. This creates a sense of stress.

To accomplish this task an individual, such as a supervisor, must work to build strong relationships UP and DOWN in the organization (with Uppers and Lower).

Individuals, like supervisors, who are in the Middle are often viewed by others as unclear, non-committal, inconsistent, or avoidant as they are pulled between Uppers and Lower.

Sliding Up, Down, and Out

To alleviate the stress associated with being in the Middle, supervisors and other middle managers sometimes Slide Up (identifying with Uppers and distancing themselves from Lower); Slide Down (identifying with Lower and distancing themselves from Uppers); or Slide Out (avoiding difficult decisions or leaving a Middle role altogether).

Uppers and Lower encourage Middles, often subtly or subconsciously, to identify and side with them, sacrificing their effectiveness to work effectively in connecting and representing the perspectives of both Uppers and Lower.



However, the Middle role involves staying in the Middle, staying connecting with Uppers and Lowers, and managing the normal stress that results from being in the Middle.

How to Keep Uppers and Lowers Connected

Act as the “go-between”; e.g., bringing policy changes from the Uppers to the Lowers and bringing concerns from the Lowers to the Uppers.

Explaining the perspective of one group to the others. In doing so, it is important to “tell more of the story, rather than less.” For example, explain the “why” behind a new policy issued by the Uppers and the specific concerns of the Lowers; not just the fact that they oppose a new policy.

Bring the Uppers and Lowers together, face-to-face. With direct contact it is easier for individuals to hear each other and more difficult to dismiss each other’s concerns or resort to stereotyping.

In facilitating discussion of differences between Uppers and Lowers consider the notion that: “There are no facts, only perspectives.” In the Middle, the search for the “truth” is a hopeless endeavor. Anything that seems like a “fact” is really qualified by the context that surrounds it.

Recap of Recommendations:

Embrace Your Middleness.

Accept that the stress associated with being in the Middle occurs in every organization and is normal.

Resist the Temptations to slide up, down, or out.

Build and maintain relationships with Uppers and Lowers.

Tell the whole story.

Keep people connected by bringing them together.

Operate under the assumption that there are no facts, just perspectives.

**Table 1: Upper, Middle, & Lower**

	Their Work	Their Experience	Viewed by Others As
<i>Upper</i>	external vision resources coordination	<i>complexity</i> possibilities complications	out of touch aloof non-responsive arrogant arbitrary
<i>Middle</i>	relationships keeping people connected	<i>stress</i> alone unconnected isolated torn	wishy-washy non-committal unclear avoidant inconsistent
<i>Lower</i>	the “real” work meaningful	<i>vulnerability</i> treated unfairly poor in wealth & resources	inflexible resistant uninformed

The Coping Strategies of Middles

Sliding Up: the tendency for Middles to identify with the Uppers as a way of reducing the stress of the middle role.

Sliding Down: the tendency of the Middles to identify with the Lowerers as a way of reducing the stress of the middle role.

Sliding Out: the tendency of the Middles to side step an issue rather than to be clear or avoid taking a position as a way of reducing the stress of the middle role.

*Adapted from David Berg’s interpretations of: Barry Oshry (2007) *Seeing Systems: Unlocking the Mysteries of Organizational Life*; Kenwyn Smith (1982) *Groups in Conflict: Prisons in Disguise*.*