



## How to engage your managers

**Training for middle and senior management roles is often ad hoc and many new managers struggle to 'unlearn' their old habits and roles. Andrew Clayson explains how training intervention at this point can deliver significant benefits.**

Right now, many businesses may be considering reacting to the current economic environment by cutting training, despite the significant impact in the short and medium term. Ensuring middle and senior management are engaged and enthusiastically committed to a business' strategy is more important than ever. Yet there is no need for massive training programmes – with a little dexterity, managers and their business can both win.

Giving front-line people training for skills and inter-personal training is expected. Similarly, “Leadership Training” has slid across the Atlantic and become an recognised way for executive teams to sharpen their own approaches by observing others in their or other markets. Each is important/valid/essential (pick your preferred adjective) but between the bread in this particular training sandwich are those with “middle management” roles whose training, especially in small and medium-sized businesses, can often only be described as ad hoc.

Yet middle managers are the interface between front-line people and senior management. They can sense the mood “on the shop floor” and feed that upwards, or translate senior management vision into tangible objectives that can be delivered. Their attitude, behaviour and approach acutely influence their direct reports, especially if their approach is predominantly negative. A great vision can only be delivered by an engaged group of middle managers. In the organisational vehicle, they are not simply the oil in the engine, but control the brake and accelerator as well.

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## Pick your tools

So how do you help your middle managers? A clear approach for their entry and exit strategies is a good starting point. How do you prepare people to move into middle management roles, or enable them to move up to more senior levels currently? Any training intervention must deliver significant benefits and quickly, and combining formal training courses and a coaching/mentoring approach is the dexterous way to proceed. You can start coaching programmes with candidates before promotion and see how they react. However, your company's culture, and commitment levels to this approach must be both positive and clear to everyone for this approach to be a success. Above all, be clear about what you want to achieve.

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The following paragraphs outline thoughts on how to be more dexterous in developing the right behaviours in your middle managers.

## First thought – leadership v management

Ensure your business has clear views on the difference between leadership and management and make sure middle managers extol this. Leadership means that new ideas or approaches are welcomed, evaluated and implemented if they will work. Leadership means getting out of the way when necessary by encouraging the right people to lead a team when their competencies are best suited to the particular task or phase of a piece of work. Leadership also means taking responsibility and is more concerned with behaviours than with functions. Warren Bennis said “Leaders do the right thing, managers do things right”, so be clear on where leadership is appropriate and when simple management will do and make sure everyone knows.

## Second thought – use project work intelligently

Project work comes up all the time and with some care you can use this to develop people. If your executives are revising the company's 5-year vision and plan, get a middle manager to help investigate options and write it. With a little care, you can incorporate sub-objectives in projects to stretch people. For a competitor review, why not mandate the middle manager to get input from all departments in the business? Perhaps you might ask for three of your competitor's strengths from each department's perspective and for options on how those strengths could be countered by your own company? The most important aspect here is to have the individual work outside their normal domain and communicate across the business. This will develop their horizontal management skills. Just don't try to run your own version of "The Apprentice".

## Third thought – be consistent and give support

Being consistent is not about giving everyone the same thing, it's about giving similar things to similarly competent people, over and over again. If someone has potential then do give them some project work, but make sure that when a similarly skilled person comes along the following year, you find some project work for them as well. Potential leaders also need support more often than skills. A coach or mentor within the business is good, but an independent coach can bring new approaches, ideas and a much broader context. Regular coaching sessions are ideal, but often a 15 minute 'phone conversation is all that is required, so look for that sort of flexibility in any coaching/mentoring model you deploy.

## Final thought – let them make mistakes

Few people get things right every time. Make sure your middle managers understand what went wrong and can picture a different way that will work. Let them try new things and experiment – you may be surprised at the result. One business I know measures the success of their innovation programme by the number of ideas that, once investigated, will not work. That, at least, guarantees they are investigating novel ideas.

## In conclusion

If your business doesn't look after its middle managers, you'll discover the extent of that failure in about four years time. When you come to promote into or out of middle management roles, the successful candidate will need to unlearn the behaviours of their old role and start displaying the behaviours required in their new role to be successful. Give them a chance to learn these behaviours as early as possible. Functional training generates managers – you need leaders as well. Change your emphasis and the costs should be minimal. In fact, this will lead to timely benefits that will far outweigh the resources used to set them up, by improving engagement and performance now, and delivering a better developed management team that are more suitable for promotion in the future.

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