

Managing in the Middle

Publicly funded organisations tend to have executive layers that translate government decisions into high-level strategic direction, and highly skilled frontline staff delivering services. A mediating layer of middle managers converts strategic direction into operational action, but is less visible and often dismissed as unnecessary. These managers play a vital role in organisations, yet rarely attract commensurate attention, support, or training.

Middle managers perform a range of important managerial functions—including communications, recruitment, budgeting, performance management, and financial management processes—that are not practiced by frontline staff and only form a minor part of a typical executive workload. Through these processes, staff in middle management roles translate the strategic direction set by policy priorities and executives into frontline action.

There are significant differences between frontline roles, such as nursing and teaching, and the functions of middle managers. Middle management roles, however, are often filled by operational staff with little or no management training or experience.

In many publicly funded organisations, staff are promoted to middle management roles due to their ability and performance in operational roles, rather than their management aptitude or experience. There is an underlying assumption that middle managers can learn ‘on the job’ and do not require training or development before taking on managerial roles.

Reliance on ‘on the job’ training for middle managers is in stark contrast to mandatory and ongoing learning and development frameworks for other professional groups. We do not allow teachers or nurses to deliver services without any training in the necessary skills, yet it is common for publicly funded organisations to expect precisely that of middle managers.



Developing a strong middle management layer requires an explicit recognition of management functions as being important and unique, and requiring specialised skills, knowledge, and training. Highly skilled and effective frontline staff may or may not be suitable to develop into skilled managers. Even those who have a strong aptitude for management need to develop the necessary skills before they can fulfil their potential.

As operational staff move into management roles, they must broaden their focus: from individual performance and operational delivery, to encompass team and organisational objectives, processes, and outcomes. Deep content knowledge, on which many frontline careers are based, becomes less important in management roles. Time and effort are required to develop the new skills required in its place.

Systematically improving the quality of middle management while maintaining largely internal promotion pathways requires both formal and informal mechanisms to recognise and develop management potential. Structured opportunities and support to build management skills and experience both on and off the job should be made available to people with the necessary aptitude and aspirations to take on management roles in future.

Most people understand from experience or intuition how damaging poor management can be to both productivity and morale of frontline staff. Far from being a wasteful indulgence or a bureaucratic barrier, strong and skilled middle management is essential for publicly funded organisations to be both efficient and effective.