

# **The Real Value of Middle Managers**

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**Summary.** Middle managers have long had reputations as ineffective or weak supervisors. But research shows that, in fact, they're often the people that make an organization run smoothly between hierarchies. Especially today, as companies become more reliant on virtual... [more](#)

The idea of middle managers as unexceptional, mediocre supervisors has been around for decades — at least since a seminal 1977 HBR article by Abraham Zaleznik that made a clear, explicit distinction between being a leader (an inspirational visionary) and a manager (a strategic administrator). These ideas

are still central to what's taught in many MBA and executive development programs, where there's a tendency to educate managers on how to "upgrade" and become leaders.

In my 20 years of being one and then researching them, however, I have developed great respect for middle managers. They are the engine of the business, the cogs that make things work, the glue that keeps companies together. Especially as remote and hybrid work takes over — and the distance between employees increases — middle managers are more important than ever. The most effective ones are in possession of humane, sophisticated communications skills and the knack to mediate and find common grounds between actors at different levels in the organization.

In fact, I believe that the division between leadership and management increasingly sounds anachronistic, even obsolete. It is time to reunite leadership and management in one concept, and recognize middle managers as connecting leaders. This concept recognizes that every leader is also a follower, and every follower is also a leader. Thus, a manager in the middle of hierarchical layers builds relationships with those at the top (from a position of followership and lower power) and with the people at the bottom (from a position of leadership and higher power).

This type of role is challenging, however, because it requires being both a proactive leader to direct reports and an engaged follower to the top management, all at the same time. Current ideas of leadership and training fail to capture this complex double act. For example, executive development programs focus on teaching leadership skills so managers can influence direct reports, largely ignoring the development of their upward influence skills. But it is directly through these double upward and downward influence activities that connecting leaders can shrink hierarchical distance and bring multiple levels of an organization together.

## 4 Types of Connecting Leaders and Practices

Connecting Leader	Practice	Main Risk	Mitigator
<b>Janus</b>	Empathizing with both sides	Burnout and emotional labor	Coaching and psychological support
<b>Broker</b>	Negotiating with both sides to bring them together	Senior colleagues' lack of availability	Embracing a culture of transparency and humility
<b>Conduit</b>	Speaking up for others	Exposing oneself personally to the top	Fostering a culture of psychological safety
<b>Tightrope Walker</b>	Critical thinking and appraising both sides of dilemmas	Cognitive overload, confusion, and being slow to action	Encouraging safe critical-thinking spaces for peer discussions

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Based on years of research on this topic, I have identified four sets of practices that are key to creating successful connecting leaders. They are illustrated by four mini case studies below, which outline both important practices and also potential risks companies and connecting leaders should be aware of as they're trained in these roles. The case studies represent real managers I interviewed, although their names have changed for confidentiality reasons.

### The Connecting Leader as Janus

Essentially, this means engaging with the concerns of both upward and downward partners in an organization. This ability to look simultaneously up and down the hierarchy, in two directions, allows connecting leaders to empathize with the burden of both sides and spread the weight of shared issues.

Chris is a seasoned middle manager in a large bank headquartered in London. He does not exude the charisma of a “heroic” leader: he is quietly self-confident, soft spoken, and very approachable. At the start of the pandemic, when emergency lockdown measures kicked in, he succeeded by keeping this active double gaze, first on his employees:

*Now more than ever I need to make sure that everyone’s voice is heard; the remoteness makes it easy for people to hide, and shy away. But then again, anyone has got different circumstances, so you have to be more flexible around this. ... You need to check in more regularly, and to reassure them.*

And keep a gaze towards his boss, by ensuring she was in the loop. By increasing the sharing of information, he flattened the hierarchical distance between himself, his boss, and his team:

*I have increased the frequency with which I hold regular catch ups with the top. I have asked my boss to join calls with my direct reports sometimes, so she can answer questions from them. We can both be on the same page, have the same temperature check, get the raw message. This helps us respond quickly to concerns from the bottom.*

Through his double gaze, Chris showed that key to be a successful manager is not enough to be just an effective leader — cherishing relationships with one own’s reports from a position of higher authority — but also that it is essential to be an engaged follower by involving and influencing his own’s boss from a position of lower authority.

The greatest risk for Chris and other Janus leaders is burnout and emotional labor. Because Chris is consistently empathizing with many different people at different levels of the organization, it is important he guards his energy and shares the burdens with both

sides. Organizations can mitigate this risk by offering coaching and psychological support for managers to discuss, become aware, and overcome this cognitive and emotional burden.

### **The Connecting Leader as a Broker**

A broker creates a dialogue between people who have conflicting agendas. Because hierarchical levels have often different goals and needs, connecting leaders can serve as interpreters and translators of these needs, brokering inter-level dialogue between the people above and below them.

Sumiya, a middle manager in a private bank, couldn't give Mark, her star employee, the top ratings she thought he deserved in his latest performance review. Mark had been promoted the previous year and Sumiya's boss, Paul, had indicated that top rankings were only for those destined for that year promotion pool. She empathized with Mark's disappointment, realizing the negative impact this could have on his motivation; she communicated this with a lack defensiveness when he brought it up to her. She admitted that she did not have full control in the decision process, but recognized that her ability to broker a meeting with a top executive (Paul) created an opportunity.

To address the issue, she set up a quick meeting between Mark and Paul. Mark had the opportunity to be heard in his disappointment and to hear Paul's rationale. The quick meeting with Paul propelled Mark's motivation. As Mark told me:

*I went to speak to Paul about my disappointment, and he was like: "I completely agree with why you're dissatisfied. You should deserve a four but I had to give you a three." He was really open and honest about it and then also he was just like: "...We value you, this is companywide decision, and, you know, don't be hard done by about that."*

Sumiya's ability to broker the meeting, which cost Paul only 10 minutes of his time, turned what could have been a negative event into more of a unifying one. Furthermore, Mark was given the opportunity by Sumiya to start building a fruitful relationship with Paul, increasing his motivation and loyalty to the company.

The greatest risk for Sumiya or any leader-as-broker is an uncooperative or unavailable executive, or one who is challenging to win over. It's also possible that, in attempting to bridge different parts of the organizational hierarchy, misunderstandings can occur. To address this, an organization and top leadership can foster a culture of transparency and humility, where top leadership accepts an open-door engagement with lower parts of the organization and embraces problems with a sense of understanding.

### **The Connecting Leader as a Conduit**

Conduits courageously amplify the voices of their direct reports upwards. In many cases, these are constructive challenges to those in positions of power that can both trickle up in a mediated way or also be directly communicated from the bottom to the top.

To understand how this might play out, consider Simon, a Risk Management Office in a large financial firm who reports to Mike, the Head of Risk at group level. Mike is the sponsor of a revolutionary change program aimed at streamlining risk reporting across divisions. Simon uses his own voice to improve the implementation:

*I just have to remind Mike what it's like it on the ground. Because him and his team on the 47<sup>th</sup> floor, they don't always have the opportunity to engage with people on the trading desks. Part of my team sits on the trading floor and they see the people, the business managers, and discuss things.*

Furthermore, Simon sponsors his own direct reports' upward voice flow by allowing them to bring their input directly to Mike and his team:

*I get them directly involved in contributing their views because, at the end of the day, they will be buying into the change. Yesterday I went upstairs with two of them and they explained (to Mike) why they were not happy, particularly on two things.*

This all took courage for Simon in two ways. First, he had to admit he was not always “the smartest guy in the room,” as he needed to forefront his reportees' voices to persuade his boss. Second, he amplified challenging points, which might be at odds with his boss' agenda. In other words, he exposed himself personally for others to be heard. We know from previous research that in order to speak up, organizations need to foster a culture of psychological safety. This type of culture is vital for connecting leaders, who often have to speak up on behalf of others or encourage their employees to speak up themselves.

### **The Connecting Leader as a Tightrope Walker**

Finally, this last practice requires critically appraising and balancing dilemmas. The different, even opposite, needs and demand from upper and lower levels place the connecting leader in front of a myriad of predicaments each day.

For example, think about designing redundancy schemes while simultaneously keeping the people on a team motivated, or applying mechanisms of performance control while ensuring that people have enough autonomy and drive in their position. In these situations, connecting leaders run the risk to be cognitively overwhelmed and paralyzed. They can overcome this by critically thinking through the different sides of impasses strategically and balancing them carefully.

The example of Andrea, the head of a client-facing team in the sales division of a digital marketing startup. As the startup was scaling up and preparing to be sold by the founders, the company introduced a digital app for salespeople to log every single client conversation. A rebellion ensued, with salespeople feeling micromanaged from the top. Andrea found herself in a dilemma: On one hand, she thought the new system was counterproductive and limited the autonomy her people needed to achieve high performance:

*I don't want my people logging every conversation record on a computer. It serves no purpose, other than telling the founders that we've spoken to the client. My people are professionals, they know what they are doing.*

On the other, she understood the need to push hard, as the company's valuation was directly tied to deals in the pipeline.

Andrea was extremely clear in presenting the dilemma and balancing the actions she decided to put in place on her team:

*The trade-off is: okay, let's do it. It's a useful record: but minimize what you write! Let's be strategic about this.*

This thought process illustrates the skills needed in the constant balancing act by connecting leaders, walking along a rope between hierarchical layers. There are risks to this, though, including cognitive overload, confusion, and slow action. It is important these risks are mitigated by offering safe critically thinking spaces for debate amongst middle managers, where pushbacks to top policies can be discussed with peers. This is especially important at times in which the company asks the most of them, like larger scale strategic changes that require redundancies or restructuring.



## **How Companies Can Cultivate Connecting Leaders**

In addition to the mitigators discussed above, there are three other measures organizations and executives need to take to cultivate connecting leaders. Without them, these leaders may feel like doing and saying what's necessary is just too perilous.

**Get company buy-in to support risk-taking.** In order to recognize the sophisticated efforts of middle managers, you have to start highlighting the above four behaviors as key performance indicators. This can be achieved through both executive buy-in and a common understanding of these practices company-wide.

Executives buy-in is important because much of what connecting leaders do is risky. It would be naïve and idealistic to expect people to ramp up their performance in these areas without providing support. Remember: some of these behaviors are riskier than others. For example, speaking up for others requires exposing yourself to the top of the organization, as well as possibly disappointing the bottom. So, executives need to be prepared to aid connecting leaders by fostering an environment of psychological safety.

Once there is buy in from the top, both the communications and human resources departments need to work together to update company-wide language — for example, on balanced scorecards, hiring competencies lists, and contracts to reflect the importance of connecting behaviors. The balanced scorecards for executive performance should also be tweaked to accommodate the importance of psychological safety and their co-responsibility to ensure connections are truly enabled.

**Create development programs centered on both leadership and followership.** First, development programs should be dedicated to unpacking, explaining, and training the abilities associated to each of the four practices. These should teach not just leadership skills (i.e. how to influence those lower in the hierarchy) but also on followership skills (i.e. how to influence those higher in the hierarchy).

In particular, the word “followership” is associated with images of passivity. Development programs can aim squarely at making followership an active action. To do this, you might design workshops that include managers from different levels reimagining and defining what it means to be active followers, sharing and reflecting on the difficulties of speaking up, influencing from below, and linking hierarchical levels. When I have run these types of sessions in organization, I have seen transformation in the room and a sense of pride in being skilled at upward influencing. For connecting leaders, learning about and normalizing active, thoughtful followership is as important as learning about leadership.

**Invest in better emotional support.** Connecting leaders, given their strategic position, are often pulled in two directions, with emotional and cognitive costs. So especially during times of change, it is important to offer this population extra support, like coaching and spaces for safe conversations and sharing. This is crucial for their success, but is often undervalued by companies who put a greater share of their coaching budget to top executives rather than to middle managers.

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As hierarchies within companies become more fluid and virtual, middle managers will increasingly become channels for relationships, influence, and connection. For companies to be successful coming out of the pandemic, they need to recognize the complex and multifaceted roles of middle managers, who are not just visionary, inspirational leaders but also courageous, engaged followers. Their ability to perform *both* upward and downward roles effectively requires them to develop very sophisticated, humane skills to bring together the layers of your organization.

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