Caught in the middle

Pinned in career gridlock one minute and cast out the next,
middle managers have grown accustomed to suffering for their art.
But the path to progress is closer than they think

Writing
Matt Packer

Illustration
Stephen Collins

In what the *International Business Times* described as a "purge of middle managers", Rolls-Royce announced plans back in June to slash 4,600 staff over two years, with 3,000 jobs earmarked for the chop in the UK alone. Chief executive Warren East warned that the engineering giant's Derby plant was where the UK losses would be "most strongly felt", and explained: "We have too complex a management and support organisation, and we need to simplify that so we can remain competitive." By the time you read this, the firm will most likely have crunched through the majority of the 2,000 compulsory redundancies it expected to make as part of its fierce restructuring drive.

The same month, disruptive automaker Tesla proved to be in a similar predicament, torching more than 3,000 middle-management roles even as it dramatically ramped up ground-troop numbers to meet eye-wateringly ambitious production targets for its ultra-green Model 3 car. Chief executive Elon Musk said: "We are flattening the management structure to improve communication, combining functions where sensible, and trimming activities that are not vital to the success of our mission."

For those who think the above cases sound bad for middle managers, well – think again. The previous month, BT unveiled a three-year job-cuts programme designed to eradicate 13,000 roles, with the axe falling primarily in the middle-management field. Describing the losses as "probably the most significant transformation we have made in the last ten years", chief executive Gavin Patterson said: "We need to do this to be competitive in the future. If we are compared with our peers, we are frankly too complex and overweight."

Anyone seeing a pattern here?

Scale and complexity

For middle managers still in situ, working conditions are fraught. In the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's (CIPD's) recent UK Working Lives survey, almost a third (28%) of middle managers said their work is having a detrimental impact upon their mental health. Meanwhile, more than a third (35%) said they have far too much on their plates (for more on CIPD's research, see the box-out over the page). So what are the structural factors contributing to this level of pressure?

Dr Lisa Day, director of the University of Liverpool's online MBA – and a former holder of strategic and management roles at Abbey National (now Santander) and Marks & Spencer – told *Edge*: "CEOs may have greater accountability, but they also have more people to whom they can delegate responsibilities. Front-line managers may have greater line-management responsibility, but their team members may all be engaged in quite similar tasks. What really differentiates middle managers is the scale and complexity of both the tasks for which they are accountable, and the sheer diversity of people and roles they directly manage."

So what does that tell us about the senior figures that are ousting middle managers amid stigmatising talk of inefficiency? Paul Lewis, editorial director at the Financial Times | IE

Business School Corporate Learning Alliance, says: "Leaders are often too quick to 'de-layer' their management structures to cut costs. But in doing so, they run serious risks. Mass redundancies may boost the chances of those who survive – but such exercises can also make it harder for staff to leap up to the next level. Nor do redundancies necessarily boost efficiency. Often, they merely add to the workload of those just above or below."

In Lewis's view, senior leaders' fixation with adjusting rigid hierarchies "often obscures more

⊙ RUNNING ON EMPTY?

Published in April, the CIPD's UK Working Lives survey found that middle managers are the most stressed and overworked of all the nation's occupational groups. While their job satisfaction is relatively high, middle managers are most likely to say that their workloads are unmanageable. Indeed:

- **24%** say they are often – or always – **under excessive pressure** at work.
- **27%** are likely to admit that **work is affecting their mental health** (compared with 22% for senior management).

In a blog on the research, CIPD argued: "It's not surprising that many middle managers feel their health and wellbeing is adversely affected at work. Not only will they have operational targets and deadlines to meet, they are often not given the training and resources needed to be effective people managers."

important concerns around culture, collaboration and communication". He explains: "When an organisation loses its middle managers, it also risks losing vital institutional memory, thereby weakening levels of engagement and productivity." When senior leaders put that level of pressure on the chain of command, he notes, "It can encourage them to tinker with details they should avoid. Whether or not it is desirable – or even intended – the typical result is to centralise power."

Cultural perceptions don't help either. Day acknowledges that the phrase 'middle manager' has long been viewed pejoratively. "Few people dream of becoming a middle manager," she says. "While the term 'leader' has become idealised, the term 'middle manager' conjures an image of being 'stuck in the middle' or 'middle of the road'."

Breaking silos

Middle managers face challenges, for sure, but today's technology also offers plenty of resources that can enable them to work smarter, helping them to delegate and better prove their efficiency – and their worth. Stuart Templeton, head of UK at cloud team messenger Slack, says that networked collaboration tools enable users to streamline tasks by moving communications from email to 'channels'. He explains: "Channels are conversations – based around a project or topic – that members can easily be added to when needed. Compared with email, channels break open silos of information and create a searchable knowledge repository for teams."

He adds: "For middle managers, this has a number of benefits. The need to pass information between different individuals or teams is reduced. Instead, team members are empowered to simply search and find it themselves. These tools also create transparent records of conversations that can help managers make more informed decisions."

For Ninad Raval, vice-president of product and design at collaboration app Flock, delegation isn't necessarily middle managers' biggest challenge, so much as following up on work and meeting deadlines. He notes: "This is compounded when teams are spread across locations and time zones. But collaborative platforms can take the load off by making work asynchronous – and yet real-time."

He adds: "With the aid of team messengers, managers are able not only to delegate work and to-dos, but set clear project timelines and expectations. They can easily follow up on tasks and discussions, because teams can share real-time updates – even if they're out in the field. Modern teams work in modern ways. And that can only be good news for middle managers."

One significant knock-on benefit of using technological tools is that middle managers will gradually develop a sharper networking reflex

– one that could help them to escape from their beleaguered plateau and advance to greater heights. Day notes: "Given the rate of employee turnover in many organisations, it is not enough for a few close colleagues and your line manager to know your strengths. Organisations are becoming more networked and less hierarchical. As such, building wider connections and relationships will not only help you in your current role – but could also boost your promotion prospects."

That steady flattening of organisational structures, Lewis notes, is already at an advanced stage in certain quarters. Indeed, he says, "Some experimental companies have even eliminated hierarchy altogether, removed formal titles and introduced voting for team leaders." On related turf, Day points out that some of the world's highest-valued younger firms – particularly in the technology sector – are operating with skeleton crews, which are likely to be flatter by default, simply because staff are more accessible to each other. "For example," she notes, "when Facebook bought WhatsApp in 2014 for $19 billion, the acquired firm employed just 55 people."

If it is appropriate to their business models, some progressive organisations may opt for non-financial means of recognising the efforts of staff members who shoulder large and complex responsibilities. "The traditional 'winner takes all' view of competition for the C-Suite is giving way to more flexible thinking," says Lewis. "Money and rank are not always the most sought-after rewards. Non-monetary benefits – such as flexible working, time off and career breaks – can be more enticing."

Critical thinking

Expanding upon the third of those reward types, Lewis points out: "The mid-career break – especially for managers in their 40s and 50s – is becoming a valuable way to pick up fresh skills and insights." While he notes problems can arise when firms try to reintegrate those 'boomerang' workers upon their return, he stresses: "They shouldn't fear for their jobs, and should be able to find roles that fit with their new levels of experience. At the same time, other middle managers can gain valuable experience by filling the temporary vacancies created by their absence. But the process requires transparency, trust and careful planning from the outset to make it work for all sides."

Meanwhile, Day recommends that any middle manager looking to rise through the ranks of a more traditional firm should take a structured MBA – on the understanding that it won't provide automatic entitlement to a promotion, but should be deployed in harness with networking skills.

Day sees two arguments for middle managers to take on an MBA: "Firstly, they are designed to develop complex decision-making skills, leadership

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⊙ THE FEMALE FACTOR

In 2013, women's professional network Everywoman published landmark report, *Focus on the Pipeline*, which examined the specific career challenges that female middle managers face. It found that:

- Just 40% of HR leaders regarded improved business performance as a key benefit of boosting the number of women in senior roles.
- Female middle managers weren't prioritising their own training and development, believing that their existing abilities and drive would lead to promotion.
- While 58% of female middle managers described themselves as 'satisfied' in their current roles, only 11% said they were 'extremely satisfied'.

Fortunately, Karen Gill, co-founder of Everywoman, believes the picture has improved over the past five years. "What really stands out from a glance at our membership is that organisations have been reviewing their policies and practices from an HR and cultural perspective," she says. "Most now have parenting leave, along with mandatory flexible working, which means that the infrastructure is there to spur on female advancement.

"Firms are voluntarily setting targets for equal numbers of women and men in interviews, or for numbers of women in senior roles. And many of them have adopted our online development programmes."

While gender pay-gap reporting has brought benefits, problems persist around salaries. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, women who return to work after career breaks earn around 2% less, on average, for every year they were out of work. One factor here is that women who return to work after taking breaks to raise children tend to take up part-time roles. While the careers of men in their 30s typically experience an upward trajectory, women's tend to zig-zag.

In order to further improve prospects for female middle managers, Gill proposes three steps for organisations to follow:

1 Look at all the relevant processes you have in place, whether as a result of legislation or internal initiative, and ask: do enough people know about them, and are they using them?

2 Understand that women often need a friendly tap on the shoulder and the words: "You are ready to go for promotion." Men tend to think about their next advancement as soon as they've been promoted, eager to learn on the job. Women, by contrast, want to be sure.

3 Get networked. Organisations share knowledge, processes and best practices, so professional networks are a tremendous asset.

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potential, critical thinking and strategic-influencing abilities. Secondly, an MBA signals to colleagues that you are ready for a more senior role."

For FT | IE Corporate Learning Alliance writer and educator David Bolchover, in order to succeed, middle managers have to want to be where they are. "Leadership is different from management," he notes. "Leadership affects others through osmosis, rather than direct contact. Management, on the other hand, involves dealing with other people's messy realities, finding out what makes them tick and solving personal and workplace problems. You can't train someone to want to manage people. And without that motivation, no amount of experience and guidance will help." **E**

Matt Packer is a freelance writer and editor. Follow him on Twitter at @mjpwriter

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