

The Leadership Skills That Managers in the Middle Need to Advance



Working in the middle is tough.

Your boss has priorities. Your direct reports have questions. Peers and colleagues ask you for help and toss extra projects your way. The result: You regularly get pulled in different directions.

Working hard and helping others has gotten you this far in your career, but now, new skills are required in order to keep advancing.

“Often people who are managing in the middle find themselves taking on more work and stuck between the competing priorities that exist within the organizational structure,” says Lisa Sinclair, one of our senior faculty for our [flagship Leadership Development Program \(LDP\)®](#).

According to Sinclair, middle managers often take these competing demands personally.

“The truth is, that’s often the system — you just happen to be in the middle of it,” she says. Managers in the middle may be vice presidents, directors, general managers, plant managers, regional managers, or divisional managers.

Leading from the middle zone isn’t about a position; it’s about meeting the demands from above while providing resources to and meeting the needs of those below.

The 6 Leadership Skills Middle Managers Need

The key to succeeding — and retaining your sanity — is learning to navigate that system. Based on decades of our research and real-world experience, we now know that the leadership skills that mid- to senior-level managers need involve a 6-factor framework. The 6 key skills are:

1. **Thinking and acting systemically.**
2. **Resiliency.**
3. **Communication.**
4. **Influence.**
5. **Learning agility.**
6. **Self-awareness.**



1. Thinking and acting systemically.

This requires seeing the big picture, seeing patterns in relationships and processes, and dealing with the uncertainties and trade-offs that are part of the complexities of organizations. Give up the need to constantly please. Trying to please everyone, you may find that you are doing a lot each day but doubting your ability, impact, and success.

This requires self-control and clarity. You need to have understanding and empathy for others — but you can't let everybody's "stuff" allow you to lose focus.

2. Resiliency.

Leadership resiliency is about handling stress, uncertainty, and setbacks well — learning to maintain equilibrium under pressure. In our Leadership Development Program, we spend a lot of time helping participants find tools for building resiliency for themselves and for others in their organization.

3. Communication.

Communication is a core leadership function, requiring the ability to think with clarity and express ideas and information to a multitude of audiences. Effective communication is also about listening, asking questions, and aligning words and actions.

At work, we need to be skilled communicators in countless relationships — at the organizational level, and sometimes on a global scale. Today's leaders must also learn to handle the rapid flows of information within the organization and among customers, partners, and other stakeholders and influencers. Learn why communication is so important for leaders.

4. Influence.

This means gaining cooperation to get things done. In today's flattened or matrixed organizations, position or expertise alone doesn't give you influence.

You may be met with resistance or compliance, but what you — and your business — need is commitment. It is important to develop a range of influencing styles to help you get different people with different perspectives on board. You can master the 3 ways to influence others.

5. Learning agility.

Seek opportunities to learn and learn quickly. To be good at anything requires some knowledge, skills, and technical know-how. What separates the remarkable from the good is the ability to adjust, adapt, respond, and be resourceful in the face of change. Always keep learning; it's how to enjoy a long career.

6. Self-awareness.

When you understand your style, motivation, strengths, shortcomings, quirks, and preferences, you are better equipped to make day-to-day decisions, as well as to navigate the big picture for yourself and for your organization. Here are 4 sure-fire ways to boost your self-awareness.

Middle managers are in the right place to collaborate with other managers to generate new ideas and solve problems. These managers can gain great experience, be involved in interesting work, and have significant organizational impact. They develop leadership skills that will serve them well throughout their careers.

Those who are able to harness and develop the 6 leadership skills listed above can “lead from the middle.” They are also more likely to advance, less likely to experience career derailment, and better able to manage not only work obligations, but also family, community, and personal demands.

Advancing Middle Managers Through Leadership Training

Managers who spend significant time leading from the middle must give up the need to constantly please. As you're pulled from all directions, it's important to stay focused on thinking and acting systematically by seeing the big picture and understanding how the various parts of the organization function together.

As middle managers learn how to get things done with the help of others, they become more effective leaders. “The higher up you go, the more you have to learn to work through other people and influence the system,” Sinclair says.

Our flagship Leadership Development Program (LDP)[®], the longest-running program of its kind in the world, is designed to help middle managers develop these essential leadership skills and make this leap.

Program participants learn to:

- Bridge the gap between senior management and the front line.
- Lead across organizational or geographic boundaries.
- Collaborate with others, including those with different communication styles, personalities, and backgrounds.
- Manage stress, build resilience, and leverage multiple life roles.
- Solve complicated problems and take wise action in a complex, rapidly changing environment.

“In the program, participants have an opportunity to experience life at different levels in the organization,” Sinclair says. “We see it as taking down the walls across the organization to really learn what it’s like to sit in those different seats so you can have a greater and deeper appreciation for how the organization really works.”

Source:

[Center for Creative Leadership](#)