

# Exposed and Under Pressure

By Saumya Sindhwani, Jerry Connor and Howard Thomas

## Why mid-level leaders aren't prepared for today's challenges.

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When speaking to HR leaders, one often hears them say, "My middle management is not stepping up, I need them to be ready for bigger roles, but how?" On the other hand, a closer look at the middle manager reveals a different story—they are already feeling stretched and overwhelmed. As responsibility is delegated downwards, middle leaders are taking on tasks that used to be done by people far more senior. At the same time, they are being asked to play an increasingly important role in shaping and developing the organisation's talent and strategic positioning.

But are middle leaders prepared for the roles they are expected to play? Are they coping well? Are businesses preparing them? These are critical questions and if the answer to one or more of these questions is a 'no', then they have to brace themselves for deep problems.

So how do we know if middle managers are coping? Probably the best perspective on this comes from the middle managers themselves. But not in a set of interview questions when their guard is up and much of what they tell you is politically correct. In order to understand what is really on their minds, we explored these challenges in one-on-one coaching sessions. And unfortunately, the news isn't good. These most valuable, critical, potential leaders

simply aren't being prepared adequately for the pivotal roles they are taking on.

### Behavioural shifts

Leadership and coaching literature suggests that there are multiple shifts an individual goes through during the journey from junior to senior management; some stop making those shifts and become comfortable where they are, and hence restrict their growth.<sup>1</sup> We focused our analysis on two critical behavioural shifts, which we call 'empathy shift' and 'resourcefulness shift'.<sup>2</sup>

The empathy shift refers to the challenges associated with learning to influence others and being able to adapt. It is about being able to step into the shoes of the other person and influence them to do what they should do or, are otherwise reluctant to do. The resourcefulness shift addresses the issue of self-awareness, confidence, and understanding your own impact on people and situations.

We focus on these shifts because of the impact they have on a manager's work and success, and also because leadership literature suggests that these are the first few shifts a person needs to undergo in order to better understand themselves and their purview of influence. The key reason why these shifts are the most critical is that, as managers advance in their career, the

most significant impact they have is on the people they work with, and how they work with them. These shifts together capture that transition.

### Empathy shift

Some of the common challenges that people go through when struggling with the empathy shift are demonstrated in the following situations:

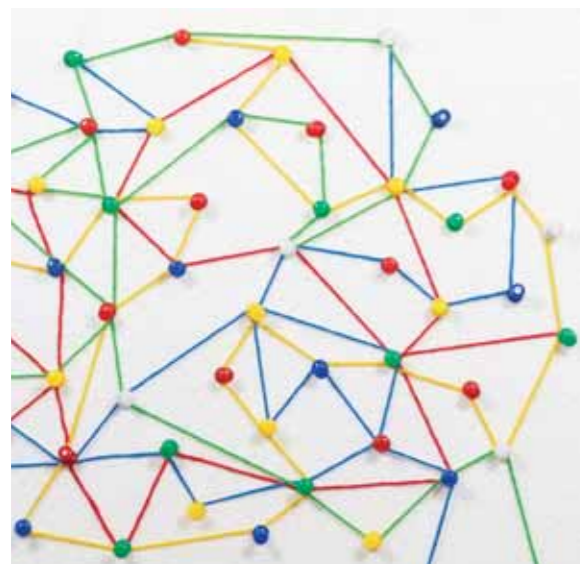
Person A is worried about having a conversation with a colleague about the impact of their behaviour. He had been avoiding it in the hope that the top managers would deal with the issue and had assumptions about how the colleague in question would react.

Person B was seeking to be more influential. She recognised the need to listen more and take a broader perspective, or, in her own words, to "worry less about being interesting and more about being interested".

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Our conclusions are based on a thorough analysis of an extensive dataset of ongoing coaching interactions of over 600 one-on-one coaching conversations. The middle leaders came from over 25 countries spread across Asia, North America and Europe, representing 15 companies.

For each individual, we looked at four anonymised coach-coachee interactions over a period of time ranging from six months to a year. In each interaction, the coachees told their coaches what they were struggling with and what they felt they needed to change. Focusing on inter- and intra-personal concerns, we identified 'shifts' (changes in mindset or attitude) that the managers see as being most critical.

Person C wanted to engage a diverse team. He recognised that he needed to slow down, especially under stress...when his temptation was to "deflect and answer" rather than "reflect and ask".

Nearly 36 percent of middle managers surveyed were struggling with such issues. These challenges were all about learning to influence others. Time and again, the coaches' notes made it clear that the leaders were entering into these conversations with their own lens and paying too much attention to the things that would motivate them. They weren't getting into the shoes of others and adapting to them. In conversation after conversation, the insights about not having assumptions, listening more, and becoming curious about the other person sat at the heart of the change the leader needed to make.

Is the empathy shift really a problem that needs to be fixed actively? An interesting perspective on this issue comes from comparing this data with insights from coaching first line managers. Do first line managers face similar or different challenges? Is there any evidence that middle managers have learnt and are dealing with issues in a different way? Or are we seeing middle managers making the same mistakes as first line leaders? We found that the empathy shift is the most common problem amongst first line leaders. In our sample, 52 percent of front line leaders were struggling in this area. While it is still the most common challenge, it is at least less prevalent—36 percent—in middle leaders.

Literature would suggest the issues we are seeing as part of the empathy shift are typically encountered when one first

becomes a manager.<sup>3</sup> By mid-level, leaders should be dealing with different challenges such as influencing across the business, promoting collaboration and building other leaders. These challenges require a higher level of emotional intelligence. And yet, while 36 percent of our sample is still struggling with the more basic empathy challenges, only seven percent are facing them. In fact, our data finds that when exposed to such challenges, middle managers tend to avoid them or procrastinate in dealing with them. When we take equivalent data for senior leaders, the percentages have flipped with nearly three times as many focusing on these challenges as the empathy type ones. Thus mid-level leaders don't seem to have made the step change in their ability to influence, lead and engage that senior leaders have.

### Resourcefulness shift

The second most common challenge facing mid-level leaders was about self-awareness, confidence and understanding their own impact. Here are some examples:

Person D realised that impatience was the key obstacle to his effectiveness. He was responding to the pressure of the role by moving fast and becoming impatient and demanding. He needed to control this impatience and spot opportunities to stop, ask and plan.

Person E spoke about the need to share ideas more with her peers and superiors. She'd been brought up to believe that one's work should speak for itself and tended to under-communicate as a result.

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Person F talked about the stress of the role. He was allowing the achievement of results to have too big an impact on him and because others were noticing his emotional reaction, his team members were also becoming anxious.

The striking thing about these examples is that the leader is relatively unaware of their impact. During a coaching session, the coach helps leaders see the impact of their reaction and then helps them to see that they (not the situation) are in control of their response. This ability to recognise your response and to stay resourceful regardless of the situation or context is a core coaching shift. From a coaching perspective, it is one of the most fundamental insights in leadership development and unlocks new levels of performance, influence and personal growth.

Over 40 percent of middle managers brought this challenge to their coaching conversation. This is almost identical to our first line management sample where 37 percent of first line leaders brought up the same shift during the conversations. It appears that any

learning and development activity that is being focused on first line leaders or in preparing mid-level managers is having almost no impact in this area. Mid-level leaders' levels of self-awareness and capability to manage their impact is more or less the same as first line leaders.

This is particularly striking given the context we have described. On the one hand, organisations are putting increasing pressure onto middle managers. They are asking middle managers to do more, to do it faster and to do it with less. On the other hand, the one skill that would arguably most help these managers to deal with this appears to either be neglected or improperly skilled.

### Where does the problem lie?

We believe that something is missing in the way organisations are managing their leadership pipelines. They have moved accountability down but haven't matched this by building the right capabilities at the right time.

In our experience, creating the necessary mindset shift is a highly

personalised activity and is best supported by quality coaching (either internal or external). So it may be that a shortage of coaching or exposure to personalised development at the first level leadership is impacting the experience mid-level leaders have. Of course this may, in part, be a function of how increasingly stretched leaders are feeling in today's flatter, leaner organisations.

Another perspective on this comes through the concept of learning agility, which is defined as the ability to derive meaning and learn from all kinds of experiences, and applying that learning to new and different situations.<sup>4</sup> Learning agility has been shown to have a higher correlation to both job performance and 'promotability' compared to traditional IQ. Learning agility and the ability to make the shifts in mindset described here appear highly correlated and hence, we would argue that either learning agility isn't being developed early enough, or organisations aren't promoting leaders with an innate level of learning agility into mid-level roles.

Like learning agility, empathy and resourcefulness shifts warrant a change in mindset and a new way of seeing

the world. In most organisations, the ability of line managers to guide their subordinates in order to bring about these attitudinal changes is lacking and external coaching is usually too focused on senior levels. Junior leaders attend training programmes that aren't set up to create the kind of deep attitudinal changes that are required. For a tennis player, learning to hit a top forehand may take hundreds of hours of concentrated practice. But we seem to think an eight-hour session in a class of 40 is all we need to prepare our leaders to guide their troops.

As leaders move towards the top of their organisations, this is rectified either through coaching or expensive, high potential leadership development programmes, or the selection process itself. But if firms are to develop the talent pipelines they require, these methods are no longer adequate. Organisations need to find ways to build these capabilities earlier and at a much larger scale. Rethinking the way we support leaders from the beginning will keep junior leaders from facing the same problems that are recurring with our mid-level managers today. The empathy shift and the resourcefulness shift are two of the most critical steps in the development of managerial talent. A one-size-fits-all training programme does not work. Alternatively, deliberately introducing deep interactions with senior leaders and coaching experiences sooner appears to be much more impactful. Unfortunately, unless we get the mindset right early on in a leader's career, they will continue to struggle later, unable to deal with the pressurised, dynamic world they are in—stemming from an inability to influence, engage and motivate those around them.

## How?

Our research suggests that by focusing on these two shifts, and by developing them either before an individual becomes a middle manager or as they become one, has significant impact on an organisation's performance. Furthermore, incorporating some of the following ways of thinking about middle management roles would also help the management development process.

### CHANGING THE ORGANISATIONAL MINDSET

Change the way you think about first line leaders. Ultimately the best solution for this dilemma lies in changing the pipeline of leaders who make it to mid-level positions. Take a look at your first line managers and identify which of them show emotional maturity either by:

- **Resourcefulness:** Being open and self-aware. When things get challenging, do you see them first look at themselves and how they can learn and change? Are they honest with themselves and quick to adapt to new situations?
- **Empathy:** Being flexible with people and being able to tap into a range of approaches to fit different individuals. Do they seem curious about, and interested in, people, their perspectives and what makes them tick?

For those that seem to have a basic mastery of these capabilities, think about how to encourage them. They are demonstrating mindsets that will enable them to thrive in senior roles. Consider recommending them for the next promotion. For those who aren't there yet but are showing interest in these capabilities, can you coach them and help them get over their hurdles and inhibitions?

### HEED THE CRY FOR HELP

The newly appointed mid-level leaders often find that they have a number of new tasks, day-to-day pressures and personal gaps that they must overcome. The chances are that many are struggling but they may not be clear or feel confident enough to say it, as they fear that their boss will feel as though they made an error in promoting them. The organisation can help them by explicitly asking about and coaching in these two areas:

- **Resourcefulness:** Support critical self-reflection by asking questions. Consciously focus on the emotional side as well as the rational. Encourage leaders with concerns or complaints to reflect on their own behaviour and to make a positive choice to act on an issue.
- **Empathy:** Ask questions to uncover your managers' experience of, and beliefs, about others. Consciously create opportunities for them to experience working with different types of people or in new cultures.

### RETHINKING THE HR FUNCTION

HR managers need to critically evaluate their first line leader training. Is it more mass production, i.e., putting everyone through training sessions? Or is there a serious attempt to develop emotional maturity early on? Consider coaching earlier in the individual's career. Look hard at your criteria for promotion. Put emotional maturity high on your list of criteria.

### Looking ahead

We have shared data that shows that an individual's learning is lagging at least one level behind the one at which they are currently operating. Middle leaders are learning lessons they should have learnt

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as junior leaders and senior leaders as middle leaders. Without these capabilities, it is no wonder that middle leaders are struggling. A global bank recently refocused its talent development activities to focus less on spending a lot on a few senior people and more on spreading their investment to benefit the many who are starting their careers. It is perhaps no great surprise that they have recently begun turning in excellent returns for the first time in years.

If organisations don't rethink their priorities and build these critical mindsets for when they are most needed, they must brace themselves for problems—their middle leaders, who will fundamentally undermine the growth potential of their organisations. But if companies can change their mindsets and invest wisely in leaders early in their careers, they can move on to ensure their middle leaders become the backbone of business success.

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#### References

- <sup>1</sup> David Rooke and William Torbert, "Seven Transformations of Leadership", Harvard Business Review, April 2005; Ram Charan, Stephen Drotter and James Noel, "Leadership Pipeline: How to Build the Leadership Powered Company", Jossey Bass 2011; Jeffrey Pfeffer, "Leadership BS", Harper Business, 2016.
- <sup>2</sup> Daniel Goleman's research supports this assumption. See for example Daniel Goleman, "What Makes a Leader", Harvard Business Review Nov/Dec 1998 and Daniel Goleman, "Emotional intelligence: Why it can Matter More than IQ", Bloomsbury Publishing, 1996. But the choice of these two areas is also born out in our own data as they cover 72 percent of the challenges named by junior leaders and 61 percent of those named by middle managers.
- <sup>3</sup> See for example Ram Charan, Stephen Drotter and James Noel, "Leadership Pipeline: How to Build the Leadership Powered Company", Jossey Bass 2011.
- <sup>4</sup> Robert W. Eichinger and Michael M. Lombardo, "Learning Agility As A Prime Indicator Of Potential", Human Resource Planning, 27(4), 2004.