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Why Work Is Even More Personal for Middle Managers

Thankfully, most companies have given up trying to eliminate the layer in the middle of their organization – that famed group called “middle managers.”

Despite – or perhaps because of – the trend in the eighties for farming these mid-level executives out to pasture, most companies have realized that reducing middle managers doesn’t achieve organizational efficiency. Far from it. Middle managers aren’t, by nature, mediocre players without the skills for upper management; nor are they sergeants taking orders from generals and translating them to privates. In fact, in this “flattening” world, where mergers have created organizations the size of small countries and information technology has further blurred the boundaries of “partners” and “competitors,” they are often the unsung heroes of organizational performance. As companies grow, become more global, and increase in complexity, the roles we ask middle managers to play – translating strategic imperatives, integrating

objectives and programs, breaking down silos, motivating the front lines – get increasingly difficult.

Typically, middle managers succeed in two ways. The first is through successfully filling a functional role. Think of a regional sales guy in China who always exceeds his quota, even if management constantly raises the bar to keep him motivated. The second way is by connecting with people to get things done. Even in situations where they lack dedicated resources or explicit authority, middle managers tend to function as “hubs” – nexus points where information, ideas, and people connect. How they accomplish this is extremely personal: they rely on relationships, networks, and other forms of authority to get things done. As our recent survey of over 500 American workers suggests, managers vs. non-managers are more likely to turn to a coworker for advice (45 percent of managers vs. 32 percent of general employees). They



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determine what a given situation requires – confidentiality, trust, expertise, leverage, a decision made – and decide who the best person is to go to.

Kathy Bexley was a high-performing sales rep at BMC Software. Her boss recognized that she has a special knack for selling complex deals. He asked her to lead a team developing best practices for the Sales Group. In the context of this team, it quickly became apparent that Kathy was far from the most technically savvy of her peers. In fact, as she freely admitted, she felt quite handicapped by her lack of technical knowledge. But to compensate for this shortcoming, she had become a “relationship-based” sales person. She invested significant time and energy in building relationships with those who had technical expertise – other sales reps as well as database managers and software consultants. In fact, she often brought software consultants along on sales calls. These relationship skills extended to the customer as well. When Kathy admitted that she relied on the software consultants to help her solve customer problems, customers were impressed with her humility and her willingness to bring in whoever could help them.

This collaborative approach had helped Kathy solve countless difficult IT problems for her clients. Often, she was able to facilitate solutions that brought peace to clients groups that had previously been at odds. In addition, the software consultants who worked with Kathy benefited from exposure to her excellent sales skills; they too became more adept at listening to client needs and responding proactively. Kathy continued to rise in the organization and recently completed a stint as the “right-hand woman” to the head of Sales for Europe. On a competency model, Kathy would look terribly lopsided, like someone who excelled

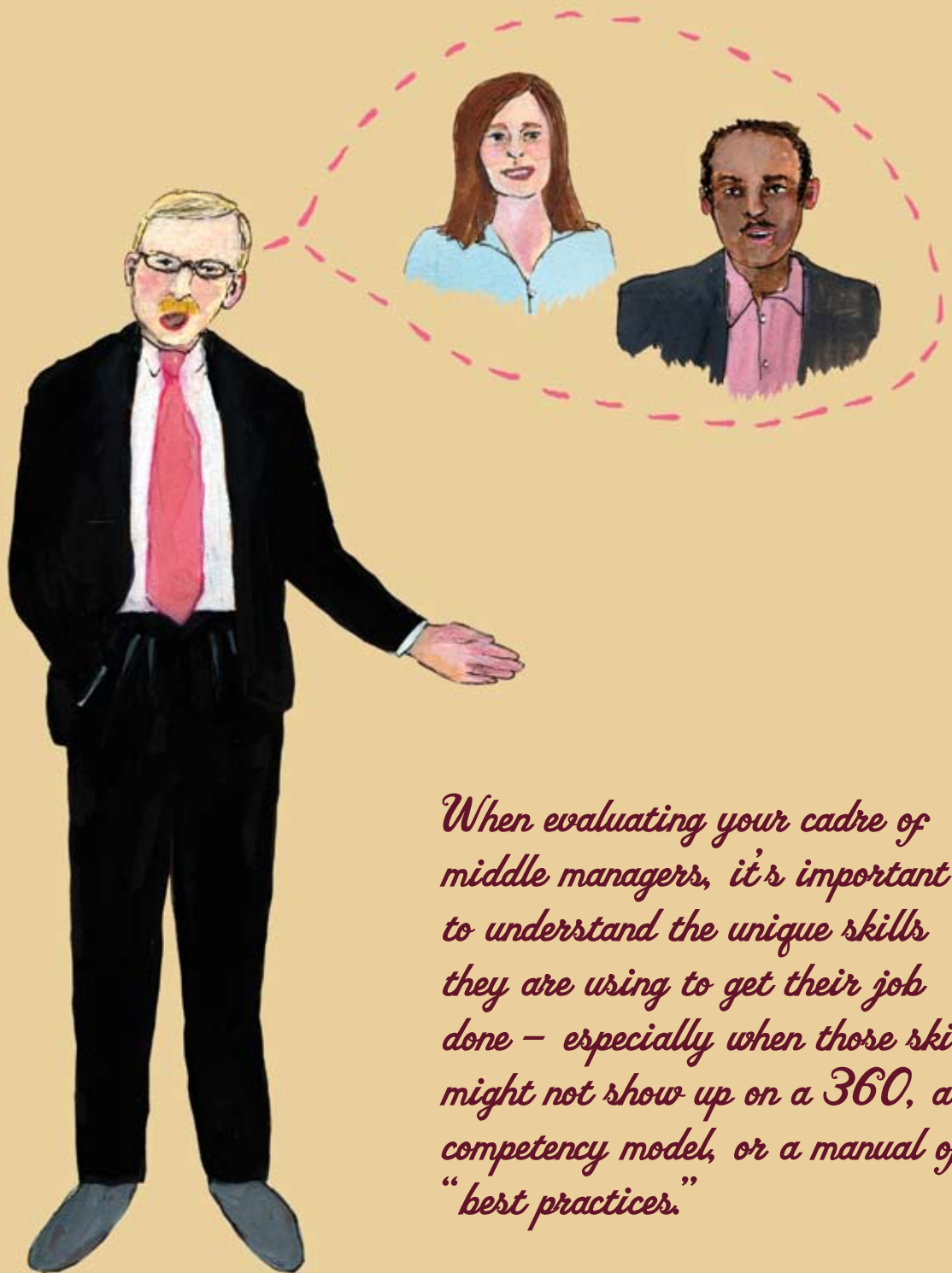
in certain areas but truly lacked in others. But what that competency model would not show is Kathy’s greatest asset: her ability to integrate and bridge people and ideas.

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When evaluating your cadre of middle managers, it’s important to understand the unique skills they are using to get their job done – especially when those skills might not show up on a 360° feedback, a competency model, or a manual of “best practices.” In many situations, companies are able to refine their

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understanding of the qualities that lead to success by conducting in-depth interviews and observations of their people and locating the “exemplars” – the employees whose behaviors are true drivers of organizational performance. These exemplar studies help companies develop a realistic understanding of how top



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performance is achieved, and a plan of action for encouraging all employees.

Greg Rosselli (not his real name), a location manager for a leading industrial services company, draws heavily on his informal network to get things done and create emotional bonds. For Greg, “it’s all about who you know within the company.” Greg was transferred from the company’s headquarters, giving him a deep reach into the organization. He knows who to turn to when he needs something done quickly, and he is able to bring in the right people with the right capabilities at the right time. When Greg took over the location, he inherited several employees, including a seasoned sales rep who had numerous local connections and what appeared to be a broad contact base. But after seven months, Greg realized that the rep hadn’t sold a single thing. He remedied the situation by bringing in a long-time contact of his from headquarters with a background in customer service. With this trusted colleague on his team, Greg was able to grow his business from word of mouth to strategic sales. Greg realized that it was better to have a team that included members who believed in his vision than a team of sales people who all looked great on paper.

Greg spends large amounts of time cultivating emotional ties with his employees. He is thought of as someone who approaches his job as an entrepreneur, as if he owned the location himself. He builds that same level of local pride in everyone who works at his local unit. He’s hard on his employees, but they respect him and want to succeed because of him. Greg’s success in building this level of commitment has earned him the admiration of his peers; some have even gone so far as to call him their “hero.”

Like many exemplary middle managers, Greg has tapped into his employees’ emotional commitment and sense of pride. Often, frontline employees are asked to do jobs that

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don’t naturally engender passion: tasks that are routine, repetitive, even boring. But what Greg has done, through personal connections, is make them feel good about succeeding. No one wants to disappoint Greg, so they put extra effort into their job. This is Greg’s

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secret to unlocking performance. Employees prefer to work for someone who they feel truly cares about them. This may not be the gregarious boss who regularly takes his direct reports out for drinks but it is someone who, within business hours, gets to know people on a personal basis.

Having worked in a range of positions at Sony Electronics in the United States, Patty De Marco, a Customer Service Manager, understands that employees and divisions

can get trapped in groups that prioritize their vertical business interests over customers or the company as a whole. Her time spent nurturing relationships with people across the company has given Patty a broader view. She is known as someone with a broad network who still manages to deal with people as individuals. Because many of the people Patty has worked

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with have moved into other roles (e.g., marketing, supply chain), her network keeps expanding. This informal network enables her to address problems more efficiently and effectively. The flow of information and help goes both ways, as she is always ready to assist people from other divisions: as Patty says, "Relationships mean people know they can come to me, too." Patty's direct reports recognize the importance of her well-established networks, and know that if they approach her with a question or a need she will have the right people in mind to address

the issue. But Patty also makes sure her direct reports start to communicate directly with those people, thereby helping them to build their own networks.

Kathy, Greg, and Patty are all perfect examples of middle managers whose strengths lie in their ability to tap the very best of the informal organization. By cultivating emotional ties, building informal networks and integrating people and ideas, they perform the organizational alchemy of catalyzing great work. Although their stories all show how they were recognized and rewarded for their skills, it's also fairly common for senior leaders to overlook people like them – leading to discouragement and a failure to appreciate their own value. Results of our recent survey suggest that those in the middle lack confidence in assessing how they contribute to companies' and coworkers' success. Although the vast majority of managers (96 percent) feel they are making a contribution to their company's success or performance, two out of five managers surveyed feel they cannot describe that contribution as "major" (41 percent). Managers also lack confidence in their work when it comes to assessing where great ideas come from. While 17 percent of non-management employees are willing to credit middle managers with the best ideas, only 7 percent of managers themselves – less than one in ten – are willing to credit themselves the same way. When you think about the people in your company, you might ask yourself: who are your Kathys, where do you find your Gregs? Chances are, they are somewhere in your organization cultivating precisely the kind of skills that are critical to getting things done in the complex, interdependent world of today's industries. The real question is: are you giving your middle managers the recognition they need – especially when their accomplishments are in the realm of the informal? ♦