

"Middleness" - a treatable organisational disease.

Earlier in my career I was a functional manager in a large consulting firm. I very nearly did not survive the pressures I felt in that role. Before long I doubted my capability, worked longer and longer hours to please all my stakeholders, never felt I was doing enough, I felt isolated, and I neglected my health and home life. It was unsustainable and I blamed myself.

It never occurred to me that what I was experiencing was for the most part a predictable systemic experience of being in the tearing middle space of an organisation, I only learned that much later when I came across the powerful work of Barry Oshry.

“Middleness” – is a made up word, not really a medical condition as far as I know. I have taken it from the Human Systems Theory of Barry Oshry in which he sets out several predictable, usually unseen, unproductive dynamics of organisational life. One of these is “Middleness”.

“Middleness” deserves our attention because it debilitates so many on whom our organisations depend if they are to truly flourish.

“Middleness” impacts important business agendas such as:

- Productivity
- Alignment around shared vision and goals
- Faltering change and transformation initiatives
- Breaking down cross - silo barriers to work more collaboratively
- Empowering an organisation and distributing leadership responsibility

With senior leaders (Tops) setting the vision and workers (Bottoms) carrying out the tasks then it is left to Managers (Middles) to help realize and imbed the vision. Being in the middle is a difficult place to master when we have multiple parties to serve, the boss, peers, customers and subordinates, who so often want conflicting things. Middles can feel torn and pulled in all directions. Yet being successful in the Middle is also critical to the health of any organisational system and absolutely critical in assuring that the goals of an organisation are met.

Operating in the tearing conditions of the Middle spaces of an organisation makes us vulnerable to the disease “Middleness”.

Classic symptoms of Middleness: (which are familiar to you?)

1. Middles tend to be involved in a hectic pace, working long and hard. Middles seem to be constantly on the go, carrying with them never ending lists of meetings to attend, items to accomplish, errands to run, unfinished paperwork, business to be transacted on the run, constant intrusions and so on.
2. Middles are prone to deflated egos, often receiving little support or gratitude up or down, feeling incompetent, seldom seeing satisfying results, and working hard but pleasing no one.
3. Middles tend to be confused by their role. Upward and downward demands may leave them without a clear position or thinking of their own, ambivalent as they try to respond to both Tops and to Bottoms. They often assume compromise positions that please no one, not even themselves.
4. Middles may have difficulty seeing them as “significant” in a system where the action seems to lie with Tops or Bottoms. As invisible conciliators rather than strategists or implementers, they may be heavily burdened yet not accomplished.
5. Very often, Middles are isolated and lonely, accepted by neither Tops nor Bottoms, separated from their peers by focus and work unit. They often silently harbour interpersonal tension and competitive anxieties with respect to peers.

6. Initiation, independent thought and action are seldom the provinces of Middles. They are more inclined to react to the situations, strategies and actions of Tops and Bottoms.
7. Middles tend to personalise their experiences. When a situation goes badly, it's because of their own failure, their lack of skill, their low intelligence, their lack of competence, and their lack of character.

No wonder Middle managers are so often seen by others in the system, Top and Bottom alike, as well meaning and hardworking, yet often uninformed and relatively ineffective, agents of the top or the workers, inconsistent, weak, incompetent, powerless and unable or unwilling to make important decisions on their own.

We appoint well-qualified and capable people to management roles, but how often do we witness them struggling? How hard are people working at hiding the reality that they are barely coping in these roles? How can that be?

An HBR white paper published March 2013, "Danger in the Middle" - why middle managers aren't ready to lead", reinforces the challenging, tearing context that middle managers are working in and compelling business reasons to invest in this critical population. It provides evidence of a relative under investment in this population that ill equips them to rise to the contemporary challenges of organisations.

From my personal experiences, my work in coaching and leadership development and working with middle leadership groups I think it is a common phenomenon.

From time to time I am approached by clients inviting me to coach middle leaders or to run time management training or such like for groups of middle leaders to address what I now see systemically as predictable and familiar symptoms of Middleness. If we see situations without a systemic perspective then, understandably, our solutions are likely to be personal, e.g. Time management training. If we can see systemically then new possibilities open up. I invite my clients to work systemically. (If it really does turn out to be a personal skill need, like time management, I refer to a suitable specialist. I'm not a time management trainer).

One powerful perspective we can offer Middle Leaders and their organisations is to develop their capability to lead from the middle with a systemic perspective, to value less their attention to task and value more their impact on the wider system they are in.

Here are some systemic solutions - (medicine for Middleness):

1. Resist the urge to make other people's problems, issues and conflicts your own. Your job is to empower them to resolve their issues, not take responsibility for them.
2. Keep your own mind: when your attention is on conflicting information from above and below, it is easy to be confused and torn. Learn to pay attention to your point of view, your values, and your solutions.
3. Be a Top whenever you can. Work on tough issues. Don't pass them up to your top. See what needs doing and act. Seek forgiveness not permission. Tops need to know only the situations that are truly unsolvable at Middle levels.
4. Be a Bottom when you should. Unhelpful directives from Tops? Middles are often better positioned to recognise and deal with downward rubbish. Deal with it at the Middle level. Don't pass it on to the workers. ("Dear Boss, regarding initiative X, I know you have good intentions here but in this state it will have unintended consequences, let's discuss amendments.")

5. Be a coach rather than a fixer. Empathise and understand their situation but don't solve their problems for them. Your job is to work with them and empower them to solve their own problems.
6. Facilitate solutions by bringing together the people who need to be together, and help them have productive interactions. Step out of being the buffer between them.
7. Integrate with peers. Cultivate cooperative, collaborative and supportive relationships with other Middles. Share information, make sense of the pool of data and identify common issues that need collective attention. Create and exercise collective influence.

So what?

It matters to me that organisations are healthy, effective and productive, and that people have the most satisfying experience of work that they can have. This drives my professional work.

I want to raise awareness of our vulnerability to predictable, but so often unseen, unproductive systemic dynamics of which "Middleness" is one. (Topness could follow; "Bottomness" was the topic of an earlier article).

I invite you to turn on your middleness radars. See what you notice:

1. Where does Middleness show up around you?
2. What is your personal relationship with Middleness?
3. What are the consequences for you? / others? / your organisation?

If this article has resonated with you I would love to hear about how you experience Middleness, and if you know others who you might be interested please share it with them. Thank you.

About the author:

Alex Smith (www.brittendensmith.co.nz) is an executive educator working as a coach and facilitator of leadership development. He works with individuals, teams and organisations to develop leadership that creates powerful culture and productive organisations. He is particularly interested in the Systemic Dimensions of leadership. Amongst the programmes he offers is "Leading from the Middle".

References:

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"Danger in the Middle". HBR White paper. Why middle managers aren't ready to lead. March 2013.