

Here's who is stalling your culture efforts

 smartbrief.com/original/2017/03/heres-who-stalling-your-culture-efforts

3/17/2017

Workplace culture efforts are often directed toward lower-level employees and those on the frontlines with customers, but midlevel managers are usually the ones who hold culture change back.

Whether building a new culture or revitalizing or redirecting an existing one, an emphasis on the lowest levels of your organization makes sense. Many companies experience turnover at these levels, and most of these employees have direct interactions with your customers, so you must engage them with your purpose and values in order to retain them and keep them on track. But a midlevel manager whose attitudes, behaviors or decisions are not aligned with your desired culture can wreak far more havoc on your organization.

Midlevel managers wield the most influence on employees' daily experiences. The adage "people leave managers, not companies" speaks to the central relationship between manager and employee.

Middle managers can either be positive culture role models and coaches for their people by showing them which attitudes and behaviors are on-brand and communicating why they and what they do matters, or they can sabotage organizational cultures by acting inconsistently with the company's core values and withholding the information and support employees need to get aligned and engaged.

In word and deed, middle managers are uniquely positioned to convey to employees what the organization really values.

Yet, middle managers are often the most disengaged and dissatisfied people in an organization. [According to researchers at Columbia University](#), they suffer higher rates of depression and anxiety than those at the top or bottom of organizations. Zenger/Folkman, a leadership development consultancy, [found](#) that middle managers were the most common employees whose engagement and commitment scores were in the bottom 5% of its study.

Middle management is usually the least engaged in culture-building efforts. It may be because these people are burdened with day-to-day operations that distract them from attending to responsibilities that seem longer-term or less defined. Sometimes organizations think of middle managers more as employees who need to be influenced than as the powerful influencers that they are, so they don't give them the training and resources necessary to reinforce and interpret the desired culture.

When your middle managers are disengaged from your culture, it has a compounding effect on the rest of the organization. Your culture is likely to be stalled by what one of my clients called the "frozen middle."



**Every manager at every level
is a link in the leadership chain
that connects culture to results.**

The company hired me to help it achieve more traction on its diversity and inclusion (D&I) efforts and more tangible improvement in the results that D&I produced. Support at the very top levels of the organization was clearly evident. The CEO set D&I as a top priority for the organization and he and the rest of the executive committee regularly communicated about it and actively championed initiatives to support it.

Grassroots support was also strong, with employees across the company participating in affinity groups, forums and trainings.

Despite all that forward movement, middle management had been left behind. It was particularly hard for middle managers, who were predominantly white males, to internalize the value of D&I. Even those who understood it intellectually didn't understand how to operationalize those values on a daily basis.

This "frozen middle" was holding the company back from tapping into the innovation and fresh thinking that greater D&I would deliver -- and that in turn was limiting the company's ability to address its changing demand landscape.

We set our sights on increasing D&I engagement and adoption within the ranks of middle management, which meant thinking about, and then conveying, the value of D&I from a middle manager's perspective. First, we formulated a rational appeal. We reiterated the business case and other data that would tie D&I to the specific results the managers were accountable for. Rather than talking at a high level about the company's goals, we connected the dots between D&I and successful hires, group productivity, and error reduction.

To address mid-level managers' hearts and to motivate them emotionally, we assembled inspiring, relevant success stories from their peers. Hearing from people at their level not only made them feel more personally engaged, but also communicated that the organization valued contributions and insights from middle management -- a message that needs reinforcement at most organizations.

And, to instruct them on how to embed D&I into their daily operating activities and reap its benefits, we looked at tools such as diversity action plans, which included templates, examples and recommended timing, and which could be implemented in the company's standard performance-planning process. Middle managers are more likely to adopt methods when they are designed to effortlessly integrate into existing processes.

By thawing the "frozen middle" at the company, we were able to shift attitudes and generate increased momentum for D&I among all levels of the organization.

Middle managers must be engaged, empowered, and equipped to cultivate your desired culture as much as are

their higher- and lower-level counterparts. Every manager at every level is a link in the leadership chain that connects culture to results.

Denise Lee Yohn is an author and brand expert who has become an in-demand keynote speaker, inspiring business leaders around the world to improve their brands. Her keynote presentations have captivated international audiences at conferences including the Consumer Electronics Show, The Art of Marketing, the National Restaurant Show, and American Marketing Association, among others. Visit her [blog](#), sign up for her [newsletter](#), buy her [book](#) and connect with her on [Twitter](#).

If you enjoyed this article, join [SmartBrief's e-mail list](#) for our daily newsletter on being a better, smarter leader.