

5 Effective Ways to Invest in the Middle

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Middle managers are the least satisfied employee group. Yet they are key to organizational success, bridging senior leaders and strategic goals to the broader workforce. Here are five tips for motivating your middle managers and transforming your workplace culture.



There is a surprising hole in the middle of most organizations – one that you might not even be aware of. Middle managers are the least satisfied employee group, and according to Gallup, only 35 percent are engaged in their jobs for reasons that include:

- A lack of growth opportunities
- Being overworked and undervalued
- An inability to influence strategy and resource allocation

Harvard Business Review's study of 320,000 employees outlines these and other issues related to unhappy middle managers but found that above all else, ineffective leadership is the primary reason these employees are so unsatisfied.

Whether you are a startup founder or a corporate executive, as a leader, you may be contributing to this dilemma. Just how important is this issue relative to the many other challenges you face?

Middle managers influence productivity, morale and retention

In addition to underestimating middle-manager engagement levels, leadership tends to undervalue the significant role and influence of middle managers, as this Middle Revolution report outlines. **Branding and culture expert Denise Lee Yohn explains that middle managers, "wield the most influence on employees' daily experiences," due to their frequent interactions with direct reports.** For this reason, the happiness and effectiveness of middle managers have broad-reaching implications for a company.

When properly equipped, engaged and empowered, middle managers enhance overall performance: productivity, customer and employee retention, and team alignment to company mission and strategic goals. But the opposite is also true: The underperformance and unhappiness of middle managers typically trickle down, resulting in loss of productivity, lower morale, increased attrition or all of the above.

As management author and expert Victor Lipman explains, "People leave managers, not companies." Given the cost of replacing an employee, (on average, 33 percent of the employee's' annual salary), retention is a bottom line issue for most leaders. Addressing the middle-manager crisis simply makes good financial sense, because many companies are at risk of losing both the manager and employees under her/his supervision.

I recently spoke with a middle manager named Sasha. She is in the recruiting space and passionate about creating the best experience for young sales professionals looking to be hired. The leader of her company was not listening to her ideas or connecting her work to the broader company vision or purpose. Rather than leave immediately, Sasha remained at her job, though undervalued and unmotivated. Because her company wasn't encouraging her growth, she invested her own time and resources in experiences that would personally and professionally develop her. She had conversations with mentors who encouraged her to find a work environment where her talent and potential could be realized. Sasha was not the first to leave, but eventually, she joined an innovative startup that is disrupting the traditional recruitment space.

Sasha took a pay cut but reports to the president of her new company. Her team currently has a 100 percent success rate placing untraditional and diverse sales candidates in both high-growth and legacy companies across the Midwest. "Today, I work for a company that values and invests in me, and I'm excited to be doing that for the team that I work with as well," said Sasha. As leaders, we can't afford to lose talented managers like Sasha, so we need to be intentional about proactively cultivating our middle managers.

Equip, recognize, engage, develop and empower

Here are five ways for you as a leader or executive to invest in your middle managers:

1. *Equip* them with technology and training to reduce administrative tasks. Not only will your managers appreciate this, it will make them and their teams more productive.
2. *Recognize* or reward their efforts privately and in front of the team, and value/respond to their ideas. One size does not fit all with recognition and reward, so get to know what is meaningful to your managers. Solicit and listen to their ideas and empower them to follow through with authority and resources.
3. *Engage* them by connecting their passions to the mission, vision and values of the organization. Ask your managers what most excites them about the company and their role, and help them do more of what they love in a way that strengthens the company.

4. *Develop* them through both traditional and outside-the-box opportunities that motivate and inspire. Invest in a shared leadership experience for your managers that will powerfully connect them to each other and the company while cultivating critical skills that will drive business outcomes.
5. *Empower* them to champion diversity and inclusion which can drive innovation and critical business outcomes. Create a culture of inclusion, help your managers learn and practice empathy, and align goals and incentives to motivate managers to realize the potential of managing a diverse team.

Middle managers are key to the success of our organizations. In many ways, they are the glue that holds our companies together, bridging senior leaders and strategic goals to the broader workforce. Investing in these individuals is key, as it yields a more thriving and diverse culture while driving critical business outcomes.

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After an early career as a marketing consultant for F500 companies, I co-founded Spark Ventures in 2007, an innovative organization that has raised and deployed over \$7M for sustainable development initiatives in Africa and Latin America. As CEO at Spark, I designed and championed a world-class impact travel program that eventually became the core product for a second company I co-founded in 2017 called Ignite. At Ignite, I help companies create a thriving and diverse culture by connecting their employees to the global community. I've had the privilege to lead hundreds of people on these journeys that build stronger leaders and teams.

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