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Survey Says

Middle managers don't like managing

Study finds 4 red flags tanking middle managers' job satisfaction. Here's what you can do about it.



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Introduction

Employers who value their future leaders have a problem. A recent survey shows that 70% of middle managers would love to return to being independent contributors (ICs) if they could keep the same pay. Even more alarming is that executives already know this — 74% agreed their middle managers would love to return to being independent contributors if they could keep the same pay, too.

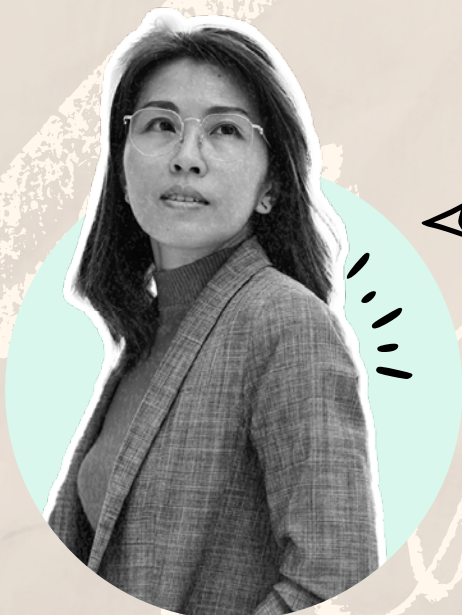
According to research by The Predictive Index (PI) in partnership with HR Dive's studioID, executives know middle managers have some concerns — but they're

either not focusing on the right solutions or disagree on what's truly troubling middle management. Beyond wanting to return to being an IC, more than one in four middle managers (28%) also feel stuck in their roles. Why?

From a shortage of resources to a lack of senior support, this report connects the dots for executives to go from knowing there's a problem to understanding the diagnosis — and how to fix it. Read on to learn what's keeping middle managers stuck and how to address their most prominent red flags.

A total of 346 people leaders participated in the research —

22% of participants were executives
(including titles such as C-Level and EVP/SVP/VP)



78% of participants were middle managers
(including titles such as Director, Supervisor, and Manager)

What's **bugging** middle managers



01

Lack of support from the top

Executives may think they actively listen to middle managers, but the data says otherwise. Nearly six in ten executives (58%) are very confident middle managers' concerns are heard when they approach them about important issues. In reality? The same percent of middle managers feel the exact opposite – 58% of middle managers claim they are not very confident their concerns are heard when approaching executives about an important issue.

Feeling unheard as a middle manager can seem debilitating, especially as middle managers already must make tough decisions about which issues to bring to leadership. Middle management is the only cohort that has the added challenge of supporting early talent and executives by being, quite literally, in the middle, making prioritization more challenging.

“When in a conversation with a senior leader, you often have to balance advocating for yourself and advocating for your direct reports. It’s a challenge to prioritize the most important thing to fight for when you have limited air time.”

Emily Willbrant, People Operations Team Lead
(and a middle manager herself) at The Predictive Index



One anonymous survey respondent had similar sentiments and wrote, "It feels really frustrating sometimes because your team depends on you to help them be more productive, but when you bring it up to upper management, they won't work with you on your issues."

The disconnect gets muddier when looking at how long it takes to resolve concerns. Sixty-seven percent of execs believe important issues brought up to them are resolved in a week or less. But less than half of middle managers agree. In fact, 51% of middle managers say it can take anywhere from one month to one year for important issues to be resolved. One year! Further, 7% of middle managers say their problems go unresolved altogether.

Staffing is one particular area where middle management is crying out for help.

Data shows that 25% of middle managers wish they'd receive more support from executives regarding inadequate staffing, while only 17% of executives see this as an issue. (Pro tip: Look for innovative, science-backed products that can provide you with the insights to fill in talent gaps on any team ... we might know of some.)

One strategy to rectify the disconnect in communication is having more open and direct conversations with middle managers. "The two biggest things execs can do to help managers feel heard: communicate the 'why' behind a decision, and share a timeline," suggests Willbrant.

Skip levels are another valuable strategy for executives to better support middle managers. Alleviate middle managers' burden of fighting for air time by facilitating connections between senior leaders and middle managers' direct reports (be it bi-weekly, bi-monthly, or monthly).

Give permission to manage.

How much authority do your middle managers have ... really? In another research finding, just 7% of people leaders say middle managers in their organizations have total authority over the areas they manage. One survey respondent went as far as to say that, "it feels like being a child asking for permission from a parent."

The learning: Give managers more power.

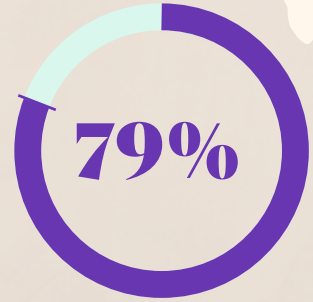


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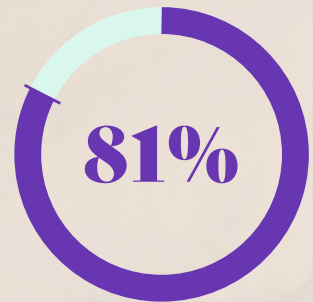
Being on the edge of **burnout**

There's no sugar-coating it. Middle managers are not OK. Data shows that 99% of people leaders believe middle managers are stressed. Of those, 44% said they're "very" or "extremely stressed."

The research reveals that managing others causes ridiculously high stress rates among middle managers. Eight in ten middle managers (79%) say they're at risk of burnout from the stress of managing people. But at least there's consensus with executives — 81% of whom agree their middle managers are at risk of burnout from the stress of managing people.



79% of middle managers say they're at risk of burnout from the stress of managing people



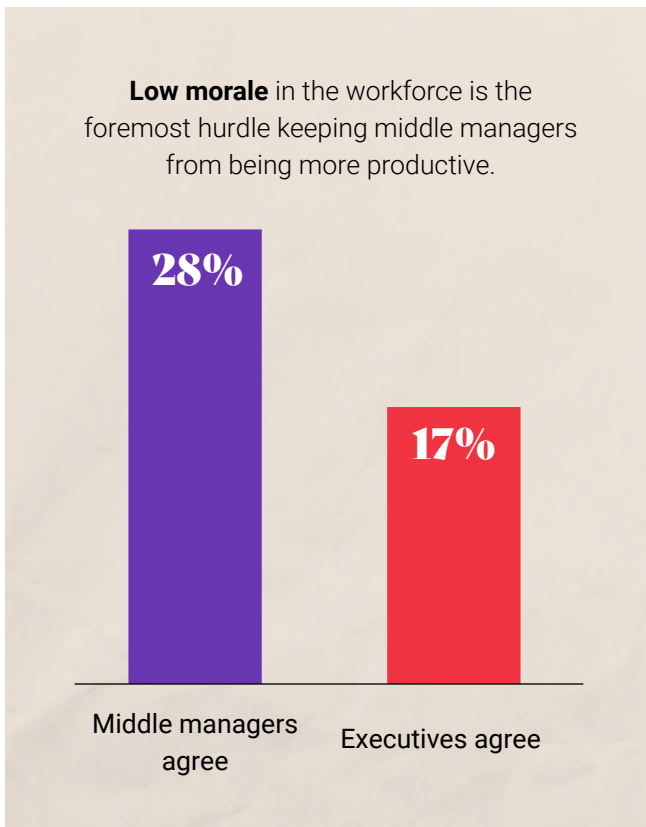
81% of executives agree their middle managers are at risk of burnout from the stress of managing people



“There’s a lot of expectations for a middle manager to support their team and get their own work done,” explains Willbrant, who manages and leads a team of recruiters and sourcers. “Many managers help their team get their work done first, and then stay up all night getting their own stuff done.” But it isn’t only managing others; company culture also hinders middle managers. More than one in four middle managers (28%) say low morale in the workforce is the foremost hurdle keeping them from being more productive. (Meanwhile, only about one in five executives — 17% — see it that way.)

It’s up to executives to encourage middle managers to speak up, protect their capacity, and train middle managers by leading by example. “It’s important to enable open conversations about how much you have on your plate without fear of punishment,” says Willbrant. “With my fellow leaders, it’s admirable when someone raises their hand to admit they’re struggling because that’s the type of honesty we look for.” Leaders: it’s okay to say you have too much on your plate and empower others to do the same.

Our tip? Seek tools that can help you gauge the well-being of middle managers (and all employees). One tool favored by PI is a feature within [Lattice](#) (an HR platform) that invites employees to drop in an emoji at the end of each week based on the question, “How are you doing?” When a culture is understanding and open, employees can be honest — putting 🙄😓😞😫 when they mean it and signaling to their supervisor that support is needed.



03

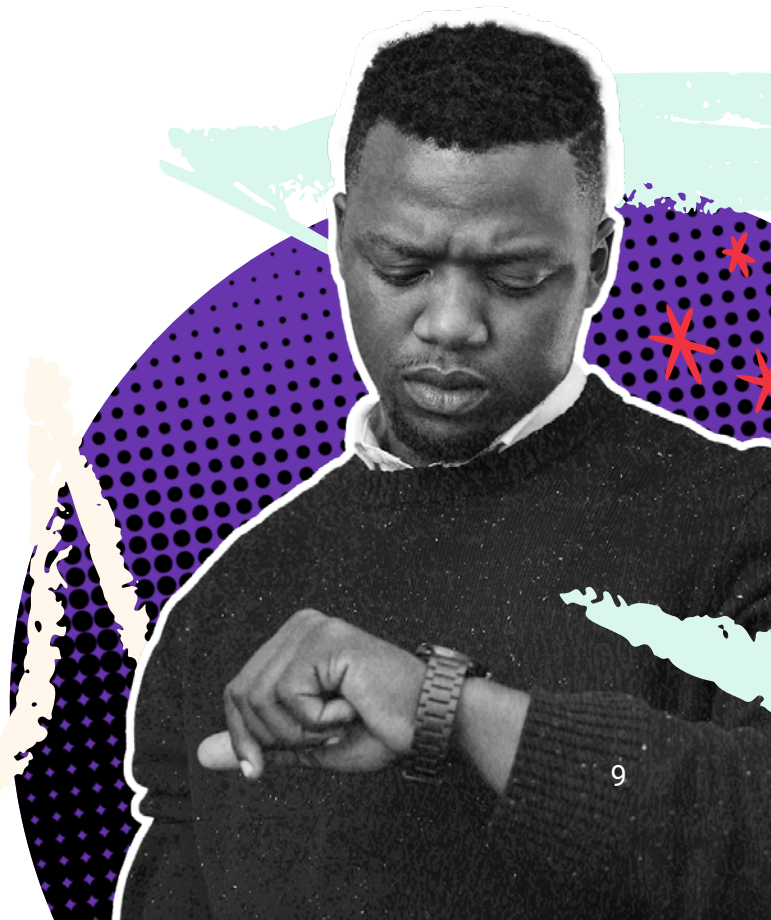
Deficit of development

A company's future depends on the future of its talent. And yet ... data shows companies are skimping on employee development — a decision that could prove costly. Deloitte research from earlier this year indicates that 29% of Millennials and 29% of Gen Zers left their current role for a new job in pursuit of better learning and development opportunities.

In our own report, nearly six in ten middle managers (58%) say a lack of time is the main factor stopping them from taking advantage of training and development opportunities. One survey respondent even noted, "There isn't much training provided, and there is a lack of concern over time dedicated to the little training [we do have]." When the same question was asked to executives, only 40% of executives thought a lack of time was a primary factor, indicating execs should get a better grip on where middle managers spend their time.



40% of executives thought a lack of time was a primary factor, indicating execs should get a better grip on where middle managers spend their time



The research also shows that 26% of people leaders believe “leadership” is the top skill middle managers should improve on. However, when broken down, executives (38%) more often than middle managers (23%) believe this to be the case. These results suggest that executives must consider how they lead and whether their leadership enables and encourages development.

What worked well for Willbrant was when the whole team took a day off to participate in training together — at her leader’s request. Group activities like these bolster team collaboration and morale and reduce the stress of taking time to participate in development

because all are involved. (Meaning, no one has to worry about coverage.) While this isn’t accessible to all teams, think about how to give middle managers permission to participate in growth opportunities.

To push the importance of growth even further, consider how most (if not all) middle managers’ concerns are connected. For example, training middle managers in delegation might help them lighten their load and reduce their risk of burnout. Consider, too, scheduling dedicated conversations with direct reports — beyond regular one-on-ones — to discuss professional development goals and help hold everyone accountable.

Change how you lead because the world has changed.

58% of middle managers say they tend to manage in the same way as they are managed. As one survey respondent wrote, “We are all stuck with how we were trained years ago by our managers.”

To circumvent this, executives should read up on the latest best practices and strategies to support specific generations, as each generation requires different things. (Gen Z, in particular, values flexibility, relevance, and non-hierarchical leadership according to [Stanford research](#).)

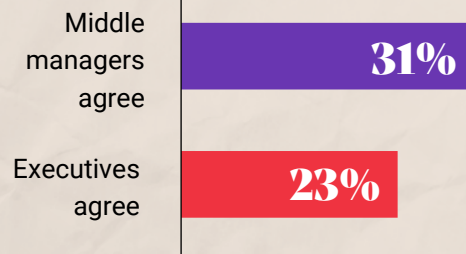
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Shortness of team resources

Middle managers lack resources — and it holds them back from being productive. More than half of people leaders (55%) say too heavy a workload is the foremost hurdle keeping middle managers from being more productive. In comparison, nearly a quarter of middle managers (31%) say needing a bigger team is the top hurdle keeping them from being productive. (Only 23% of executives see it this way.)

As managing people is a significant roadblock for well-being, it's also a clear roadblock for productivity. Given middle management acts as the link between early talent and executives, their productivity is crucial to every company's operations and should be prioritized.

Needing a bigger team is the top hurdle keeping middle managers from being productive.



Unfortunately, more executives (74%) than middle managers (66%) believe their organizations invest in making middle managers more productive. One such solution could be helping managers manage better, as over one third of middle managers (34%) say difficulties managing others is the foremost hurdle keeping them from being productive. And when you see that 53% of people leaders report middle managers spend at least half their time managing others, it's no surprise middle managers feel strapped. The same goes for flat organizations — one survey respondent noted that folks in leadership roles often have to do low-level tasks because there isn't enough staffing.

Outside of productivity, another red flag middle management is waving is team dynamics. More than one third of middle managers (34%) say they lack the resources to address team conflict. (Only 21% of executives see it this way.) Sounds like trouble.

A powerful remedy for productivity and conflict issues is awareness. By gaining insight into employees' strengths and weaknesses, leaders can learn how to better support their direct reports. Understanding how individual team members like to work and be managed can help middle managers delegate smarter, increase team productivity, and navigate conflict effectively. (If you're into it, [PI's Inspire](#) could help you do it.)

Enter a new way of managing.

Despite its benefits, remote work put new burdens on middle managers.

“Building relationships remotely and holding people accountable when you're not in-person to check in have been two new challenges for managers in recent years. You have to build a rapport and trust with someone over Zoom, and being able to build a relationship remotely becomes a unique skill set.”

Emily Willbrant, People Operations Team Lead at The Predictive Index

Executives should consider this added load, how to lighten it, and how to lead by example.



Help your managers — so they can help your business.

Most (if not all) executives were, at one point, a middle manager. Put yourself back in your middle management shoes, and consider what you wished was different then. Now, you can choose to be the leader who inspires middle managers to be their best and bring out the best in others, or the one who perpetuates inefficiencies.

“Remember when you were there, but also try to understand what it’s like to be there now,” says Willbrant. The stakes, the tools, the playfield ... all of it has changed. Now, executives must adapt to the changed landscape and help middle managers find their footing so they can grow — and help the company grow, too.

Facilitate that growth with The Predictive Index. An award-winning talent optimization platform, PI gives any manager the tools to motivate and lead their people. Use 65+ years of behavioral science to understand any person instantly, and get custom tips to solve conflict, prevent miscommunication, and improve work relationships.

**Middle managers have it tough.
Develop much stronger leaders
with The Predictive Index.**





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