

CAREER MANAGEMENT FOR MIDDLE MANAGERS

Issues and Challenges

A THINK TALENT ROUNDTABLE

ABOUT THINK TALENT SERVICES

"Enabling growth strategies by catalyzing Transformation, Leadership and Capability"

Think Talent is a consulting and facilitation firm that collaborates with organizations to help them realize their full value delivery potential. Our strengths lie in creating solutions around strategic leadership alignment, help organizations chart transformation road maps and support building of superior leadership talent. Our team (and network) consists of hand-picked seasoned professionals from business & HR functions who have had extensive experience inside organizations and are considered experts in their fields. We believe that each client situation is unique and requires a 'made to fit' solution creation approach. Co-creation, simplicity and pragmatism are key elements of our solutions.

Breakfast meeting series

The purpose of this series of roundtable discussions is:

- To disseminate ideas that will help to address and synthesize critical issues in the area of leadership development-specifically applicable and relevant to the Indian context
- Create a platform to bring together a group of corporate practitioners on a regular basis and learn from their perspectives as well as share it with the larger corporate fraternity

This series of breakfast discussions was held on 20/Jan/2012 and the topic was “**Career Management for Middle Managers - Issues and Challenges**”

Note:

The document captures the thoughts, insights and views of the participants shared through the discussion, with additions made by Think Talent to enhance the content and lucidity. It is meant for limited circulation and no parts of the content can be reproduced without permission.

Participant profiles are shared later in the document.

One of the Hay group surveys indicates that more than half of senior managers feel that middle managers are not committed to achieving their company's strategic goals, with 62% bemoaning their lack of management and leadership skills. The above finding is an alarming one considering the role and impact of middle level managers in the organizations' growth and sustainability.

There are differing views when we discuss the state and strength of middle management across industries. Largely the belief is that the overall contribution from middle management can be increased significantly provided some fundamental issues are addressed. One of these issues revolves around ensuring that the middle management is fully aware of the strategic direction of the organization and how their efforts link to the future direction. The mind-set of considering mid-level managers as key stakeholders in this context needs to be nurtured at the top level.

In the last couple of decades, opportunities in the Indian market have been relatively high as a result of a fast growing economy. The abundance of opportunities has made many employees comfortable and at times complacent about developing themselves. Movement to the next level role or compensation level is almost guaranteed and sometimes becomes almost time-bound. One either gets promoted within an organisation or else moves out to an apparent better opportunity outside the organisation.

The job of middle managers has also evolved in the last decade and is quite varied. It can be anyone occupying positions that fall within a range of 'two levels below the head of the organization' and 'one level above supervisory staff' or professional workers. This has raised the bar of expectations on this layer of management. They are expected to perform multiple roles: from managing and motivating people, influencing a multitude of stakeholders, collaborating with a host of partners, understanding and explaining the strategic direction of the organization to sometimes acting as architect or co-creator in the larger organizational agenda.

The middle managers are caught in a whirlwind of

- Demands from organizations which have increased phenomenally
- Expectations for personal success from themselves and the society which are becoming higher and
- Roles that are increasingly becoming more complex alongside inadequate or insufficient development focus.

The road ahead will definitely force organizations and individuals to focus on this 'sandwiched' management layer. This is potentially the future pipe of organizational leaders who can impact the overall culture and manage both the efficiency and effectiveness domains for the organization.

Challenges and expectations at middle level

Middle managers seem to be in a peculiar situation because the other layers of the management i.e. the operational and strategic, have clearly chalked out agenda and concrete expectations linked to organizational outcomes. It is the middle layer which is expected to adapt the most and be flexible with regard to their roles and results depending on the situation and the context. It is often called upon to deliver what does not get delivered either above or below them in a manner which covers 'anything that falls between the cracks'.

“Middle management is the most vulnerable lot. Senior levels tend to become hard task masters. The role of senior leadership in coaching and developing the middle layer is crucial”

DEEPAK BHARARA, LANCO INFRATECH LTD.

The grand design as conceptualized by the strategic team for the organization has to be cascaded down by the middle layer. This requires involvement and adequate support from the top layer. However, often the top layer assumes that the middle management is competent enough to interpret the larger strategic agenda and will be able to independently create the tactical plan that is in sync with the strategic priorities. There is inadequate attention to converting the strategic agenda to a well aligned and orchestrated tactical agenda through the middle of the organization. This is partially due to paucity of time at the senior levels to coach the middle layer and partially due to lack of skills, process and personal orientation among senior leaders.

“Middle is a complicated piece. In many organizations people hide behind processes. Also the middle layer feels sandwiched. The vulnerabilities of this layer are because of high aspirations, social pressures, capability issues and relative worth within the organization.”

GURMOHAN SINGH, BPTP LTD.

“Senior leadership expects the middle layer to pick up without exposing or preparing them for any situation or event

VIPIN ARORA, HONEYWELL INTERNATIONAL

Most of the today's middle managers started their career in the post liberalization era where job opportunities were in abundance. Upward career movements happened in quick succession largely because of the favorable economic policies linked to organizational growth. However, individual sustained success is attributable to one's own set of capabilities. This creates a challenging situation for people in the middle layer and also for HR and Business leaders. Majority of middle managers have high aspirations to move up and also a strong belief on their capabilities because of past success. However the stark reality is that very few may be really prepared to handle senior roles, as is evident from companies lamenting the lack of a leadership pipeline and succession.

“Many middle managers don't care what they don't know. Their aspirations are high particularly on the commercial side.”

VIKRAM CHHACHHI, DHR INTERNATIONAL

“Today the complexity in roles is multiplying and there is a huge capability deficit. Managing middle managers aspirations in this scenario is very difficult.”

SAURABH UPADHYAY, BACARDI

Ways of developing middle managers

Leaders are unequivocal when it comes to the importance of developing the middle layer. The key is to identify what is really required and ways of delivering it while maintaining the requirements of the business. Since middle management by definition constitutes a significant pool of managers and leaders within the organizational hierarchy, it is absolutely necessary to customize development offerings, yet be able to scale and rapidly deploy development efforts. Size, scale and nature of industry/ business are other critical factors in designing and implementing development agendas.

“Middle managers in general should be able to flex themselves fast, should be able to manage conflicts and be able to articulate and practice how to get things done

SANJAY CHATURVEDI, P2V

The idea of leaders spending time with their middle managers and clarifying or explaining the long term strategy along with coaching them on specific issues is one of the robust and practical ways of development. Beyond the normal management processes of reviewing achievement of outcomes (which can be a potential development opportunity), there is a strong business reason to develop and engage the middle managers through other forums and formats of on-the-job development. The middle's potential, ability and influence to create positive energy and productive environment within the organization can be leveraged through investment in building both skills and mindsets. Senior leaders who believe this and act accordingly have the potential to multiply their own influence and effectiveness multi-fold through the middle management.

“Leaders sometimes need to speak the language of middle managers and display genuine empathy in understanding their issues”

SAURABH UPADHYAY, BACARDI

Middle managers of today's era need to be sensitized to the demands and thinking & operating styles of two very different generations that they need to deal with. On the one hand there is the young generation Y that is radical, confident and technology savvy which usually reports to them. On the other hand there is the old generation the so called baby boomers who are usually hierarchy driven, have spent long tenure in one organization and may take a personal view on feedback. Middle managers often report to this generation. The balancing act of dealing with these two generations also communicating the views and perspectives related to any event within the organization or outside environment requires sensitivity, awareness and specific skills. Often, middle managers aren't prepared for this and therefore they end up either treating their subordinates exactly the way they were treated by their leaders or at times emulating a gen Y behavior or approach while dealing with their own leaders. This creates confusion, stress and also demoralizing climate within the organization.

In a matrix, especially in a transnational organizational environment, middle managers are interacting with employees and partners across geographies, ethnicities, races etc. Post liberalization a lot of foreign MNCs have opened their offices in India along with a lot of Indian organizations going international, the need of cross-cultural understanding has emerged as a crucial success factor in terms of long term career planning. Middle managers often need to be exposed early in their careers to this emergent development area . One of the practical and effective ways of doing it is actually placing the employee in different cultural and job contexts.

“The importance of job rotation as a mechanism to develop middle managers is significant. Leaders must leverage this”

VIPIN ARORA, HONEYWELL INTERNATIONAL

There are companies that are further up the curve in the science and art of developing leaders and nurturing talent. A lot can be learnt and contextualized by other organizations in order to initiate or strengthen their own development charters. What we need to remember is “Great companies are implementing talent development practices in a systematic manner for years together. It takes sustained effort over time” says Bimal Rath, Think Talent Services. Companies have to pay urgent attention, deploy the right resources, and plan and measure talent development efforts to nurture, engage and retain talented managers who can be the future.

“There should be target for top leadership to assess their involvement and engagement in the development of middle managers. It can be in the form of how many people have they developed/mentored/coached. How many top performers has a leader released to some other part of the organization can be another important metric.”

DR. PRAKASH V BHIDE, JK ORGANIZATION

“Generation Y values flexibility, openness, transparency and speed with minimal ifs and buts. These characteristics demand looking at development structure differently, reducing or perhaps eliminating the element of rigidity from development structures.”

SAURABH UPADHYAY, BACARDI

The key question remains however—is there enough attention and systematic effort? It appears from engagement, attrition and “lack of leaders” data that middle manager development may warrant significantly more attention by top leaders and HR.

Paradigms of dealing with middle management

The ways organizations treat the middle layer sends out a message. Day to day dealings of top leaders with their next layers can have a huge bearing on the psyche and therefore on the actions of this set of audience. If the message sent out by the organization is loaded with self- centered ideology and conveys the idea that the middle management population is expendable, a potential partnership is unlikely. There will be lack of trust and a genuine investment in effort from both sides.

“There are situations where senior management ends up taking credit and passes failures to middle management”

DEEPAK BHARARA, LANCO INFRATECH LTD

“If we compare money and effort spent on development as against recruitment, we realize it is largely skewed towards the latter. Additional attention to development and nurturing of middle managers can be far more cost effective”

BIMAL RATH, THINK TALENT SERVICES

The attrition levels in this group are also fairly high and there can be various reasons attributed to this phenomenon. Usually insufficient or unclear communication is one of the biggest reasons because of which people in this group leave. They think that they are not valued enough in the organization which instigates them to look for opportunities outside. The ability to have a constructive dialogue and give a crisp and clear message is not always a clear strength in many senior leaders. It results in creating a perception that senior leaders are hiding behind processes instead of taking a clear decision in a lot of sensitive issues. Invariably, managers make choices to stay (or leave) after a dialogue with senior leader's. There is an opportunity space there which is often ignored.

“Senior Leaders believe that an outside person will do a better job and it results in many middle managers questioning their own loyalty to the organization

DEEPAK BHARARA, LANCO INFRATECH LTD.

One of the key lessons to be learnt is that success of top leadership team is dependent on execution and alignment of the larger organization with the vision/mission created by them. It is here that the middle layer plays a significant role. What needs to be understood and acknowledged is that not everyone will be a High Potential, therefore the ability to engage and inspire the larger mass often addressed as “solid citizens” also requires attention and different approach.

“Learning agility is the most important competency that ensures long-term and continuous growth of individuals and organizations”

BIMAL RATH, THINK TALENT SERVICES

How one instills a culture of becoming a CEO of his/her own career is linked to an organization's culture, processes, leadership but the significant role needs to be played by the employee. If middle managers start believing and demonstrating the above phenomenon (becoming a CEO of his/her own career), it can transform the people capability of any organization. It can catalyze the process of succession planning and can add a whole new meaning to employee engagement. It is crucial for the senior leaders to develop and nurture the idea of clear long term career direction so that individuals specially middle managers can focus on task, team and future trajectory without getting distracted intermittently by so called “attractions and insecurities”.

“A lot depends on the relationship between the Business Head/CEO and the HR Leader when one has to work on the long term people capability agenda of an organization”

VIKRAM CHHACHHI, DHR INTERNATIONAL

Career Management and Performance

While dealing with middle managers, one needs to clearly differentiate the issues of managing careers of high potentials vis a vis others. The Hi Pos in this population are go-getters and are usually under tremendous pressures to fulfill their ambitions and aspirations. This pressure gets exaggerated by family and colleagues often. The ability to understanding middle manager aspirations and needs is critical to keep them engaged and motivated. The social pressures faced by a majority of the population in the middle layer perhaps are similar. However Hi Pos at times tend to get deeply impacted by it if they don't get to hear about what can they expect from the organization in the near future.

There are instances where Hi Pos may not even realize their real strengths and weaknesses; however they want to be a part of the bigger game. It is important that organizations invest early and significantly to bring in a sense of balance among developing leaders. This goes a long way in personal and professional development, and can be great asset for the organization.

“Tremendous amount of communication is required for middle level; the High Potential employees can be coached individually. For the larger set of population in this layer, one can choose other options of communication and development.”

DR. PRAKASH V BHIDE, JK ORGANIZATION

The issue of performance needs to be looked at from several dimensions. It can be a result of role becoming bigger for an individual as against his/her current capabilities. It can also be a result of not getting enough developmental support from the leader or the organization in order to deliver as per the expectation. It can be a case of opting for a position from purely a status elevation or commercial gain perspective without realizing what the job actually entails. These situations can be dealt proactively and also reactively though the preference should always be the former. For handling such situations proactively leaders must spend time in having some sort of career conversations .In case of non-performance, development efforts to support on-job performance is a must, else “find out suitable job opportunities for these managers” say Dr.PrakashVBhide, JK Organization

“Lot of middle managers need and enjoy learning from their own leaders, they get clarity and motivated when their leaders spend time with them.”

SAURABH UPADHYAY, BACARDI

Summary

Middle manager roles require a strong balancing act. They have many stakeholders to manage and therefore influencing and collaboration becomes extremely important skill sets for this layer. The notion of success in many of these cases is linked to past achievements which fosters a belief that they are ready for the next level. This notion may or may not be true; however for an organization the challenging aspect is to make a large segment of this population confront the reality and also keep them motivated and engaged along with shaping up career paths for the people who are considered to be High Potentials.

The rising demands from all corners push individuals who are in the middle management levels to achieve tangible success as quickly as possible. This perpetuates a vicious cycle of having an unclear and hazy assessment of capabilities and passions. This results in potentially unclear role choices and a lack of preparedness for taking on higher level jobs. This finally could increase stress levels and even mar the self- esteem of individuals. This stage of life makes people believe in catapulting their careers to the highest level within the shortest span of time.

The onus is on leaders and also on corporates to ensure that while middle managers prepare for a successful career, they are able to adequately develop themselves to match expectations. Enabling deeper reflection on issues which guide career and developmental choices has to be inbuilt into organizational processes. These choices, connected to their real motivators and talent, will be helpful to the individual as well as to the organization.

What we need to keep in mind is “As a society we are moving fast. We have to make sure skill sets are improved, mindset are shaped properly and talent is nurtured so that the issue of being sustainably employable is addressed from a long term perspective” says Gurmohan Singh, BPTPLtd.

Participants Profile

SAURABH UPADHYAY DIRECTOR – HR, BACARDI

Saurabh Upadhyay has been with Bacardi since June 2010 and working as an Director - Human Resources. As Head of HR for Bacardi, he own and drive the people strategy of the organization. Currently he is focused on Capability Enhancement, Talent Development and Organizational Design. Saurabh was associated with Nokia, TAS, and Tata Motors. Prior to working with Bacardi as a Director, he was Head HR for Markets Organization of Nokia India, this included functions like Sales, Marketing, Services, Logistics, Finance and Control, Legal and Government Relations etc.

VIPINARORA DIRECTOR - INDIA C&B, HONEYWELL INTERNATIONAL

Vipin Arora is the Human Resource professional with extensive experience in projects organization, manufacturing set-up and BPO sector. Also he is well versed with all aspects of HR and Training, Employee Relations, Performance Management, Comp & Benefits. He thinks through and maintains his cool personality at all times. His methodical approach to HR policies has been extensively appreciated by one and all. He is an alumni of XLRI having experience in MNC'S like Aegis, IBM Daksh, NEW Holland Tractors, SIEL etc. His behaviour and human approach to every issue make him an outstanding personality.

DR. PRAKASHVBHIDE GROUP PRESIDENT HR, JK ORGANIZATION

Dr. Prakash Bhide joined JK Organization in 2002 and has significantly contributed in improving Quality of Top Management Leadership and Building Strong Leadership Pipeline for the 20,000 Employees of diversified JK group. He has worked with International HR Consultants such as Hewitt for Executive Coaching using Marshall Goldsmith Methodology, Saville Holdsworth Ltd (SHL), Hay Group, etc., Prof. Richard Beatty, Dr. Tim Jones (Game Changing Innovation).

DEEPAK BHARARA, DIRECTOR- CORPORATE HR, LANCO INFRATECH LTD

Deepak Bharara is Director – Corporate HR of Lanco Infratech Ltd and takes care of people processes across the Group. With over three decades of experience with multinationals and big business Indian groups, he has held leadership positions at Eicher Tractors Ltd, Indian Express Group, Samtel India Ltd, Whirlpool India Ltd, Bharti Group, Jindal Steel, Aditya Birla Group and GMR. He has a Masters degree from Faculty of Management Studies (FMS) with specialization in HR & People Management. He is an LL.B from Delhi University. He is well versed with Infrastructure Industry & its processes to achieve operational efficiencies with customer service orientation approach aligned with commercial acumen.

Participants Profile

VIKRAM CHHACHHI, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, DHR INTERNATIONAL

Vikram has over 20 years of experience including 12 years in executive search industry. He has successfully engaged with Indian and international clients in consumer packaged and retail goods, telecommunications and technology. He has led teams in Accord group, Amrop Hever Group. Before joining Executive Search profession Vikram was Senior Editor with Business Today. He has graduated in Computer Science from St. Stephen's College.

SANJAY CHATURVEDI, FOUNDER, P2V

Sanjay Chaturvedi is a seasoned HR professional with 22 years experience gained in the manufacturing, auto, processing, energy / oil and IT industries in cross-cultural international environments with a demonstrated track-record of formulating HR strategy that aligns with business objectives, integrating business process performance with people capability, initiating and managing large scale and complex HR projects at a business group level and harmonizing policies and work practices across the business group. Currently runs his own organization People to Value (P2V).

GURMOHAN SINGH, HEAD HUMAN RESOURCES, BPTP LTD.

Gurmohan heads Human Resources at BPTP Ltd, a leading company in NCR's real estate. With its impressive portfolio of contemporary commercial, residential, IT park and retail developments, the company is spearheading the growth and expansion of the real estate sector. Gurmohan's last assignment was with Uninor as Associate Vice President - People & Organization.

BIMAL RATH FOUNDER ANDMD, THINK TALENT SERVICES PVT LTD.

Bimal consults coaches and facilitates leader's team for individual development and superior performances. Bimal has over 23 years of experience across different industries, and across geographies including the USA, Middle east/Africa and APAC. His latest corporate position was as HR Director for Nokia, supporting the massive growth for the company over the last few years. He has previously held senior positions in Eicher, British Telecom and Tata Sons. He is a certified executive coach for Center of Creative Leadership, USA. Bimal is advisory board member of several companies across industry.

Think Talent Facilitators

VIVEK TIWARI

Vivek has wide experience is in the area of Organization Development and Training & Development. He has worked with Indian and Global companies in IT, ITES, Financial and Travel sectors. His work involved designing, developing and delivering leadership interventions across levels in organizations and connecting it to the overall Talent Management process. He was one of the core members who set up the Training function for a leading European Telecom client of HCL, operating from India. He has earlier worked with American Express in their Leadership & Employee Development department. He has also served in the Training and Development wing of companies like HCLand Cendant.

NITIKA SETHI

Nitika specializes in creating client centered solutions through co-creation and a deep insightful partnership approach. She has managed projects which typically include large groups of people and revolved around change. She manages projects in areas of coaching and leadership development. Her past experience has been with companies including Linkage India, Right Management and Berggruen Education where she has implemented strategies and helped setting up systems and processes. She monitored successful launches of new services and training programs and was part of general management in the organization.



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