

Middle managers often are excluded from important development opportunities based on assumptions that are dispelled here.



outside
LOOKING in



BY JIM KAUFFMAN

Business leaders and HR professionals agree that effective midlevel leadership is essential for consistent strategy execution, and recent research underscores the need—and urgency—for strong leaders in the middle ranks. DDI's 2014 *Global Leadership Forecast* found that nearly half of the 13,000 leaders and 1,500 HR professionals who took part in the survey rated midlevel management as the most critical leadership level to get up to speed faster.

Meanwhile, a 2013 Aberdeen Group study shows that it can take 29 months for a high-potential midlevel leader to develop to the point where he is ready for the move to the senior level—a finding that underscores how much there is to learn at the midlevel and also reinforces the fact that there's little time to waste.

What's more, rising leaders who falter when they make the critical transition to the midlevel may become frustrated and take their talents elsewhere. The ensuing "leadership drain" thins the talent pool at the midlevel and deprives the organization of high-performing, high-potential leaders who might later be called on to step into more senior strategic roles.

Overlooked leaders

It's puzzling, then, that while the importance of the midlevel appears to be beyond dispute, many organizations consciously choose to devote their limited development resources elsewhere. For example, they opt to invest in the front line, where there is the largest number of leaders, and the senior ranks, where an investment in development is seen as synonymous with investing in the future of the enterprise.

The midlevel, however, tends to get overlooked. Executives acknowledge this: Aberdeen research shows that 46 percent of executives believe the greatest lack of leadership development in their organizations lies at the midmanagement level.

The result is that although middle managers benefit from training opportunities earlier in their leadership career, they enter the “development dark ages” when they transition to the midlevel—missing out on growing their leadership capability at the point in their career where they need it most.

To move them beyond the dark ages, middle managers need a “development renaissance” in which they get level-specific development. Yet, despite this apparent need for such a renaissance at the midlevel, we often hear from

organizational development and talent management professionals that they feel their hands are tied.

They say their efforts to design and deliver midlevel

development programs often are thwarted by an organizational view that such training is unnecessary or ineffective. This viewpoint typically is based on three incorrect assumptions.

Assumption #1

The skills leaders develop in frontline roles will be sufficient when they move to middle management.

A common misconception is that the management training leaders receive at the frontline—in areas such as coaching, performance management, and change leadership—will smoothly transfer to the midlevel. Although a few remarkable leaders do make a successful transition to the midlevel without the benefit of additional training, the leaders themselves tell a very different story.

DDI’s *Global Leadership Forecast* found that only 10 percent of midlevel leaders sampled across industries and geographies feel they are well-equipped to take on the challenges of

their roles. A deeper look into the data reveals that younger and often less-experienced leaders at this level feel especially ill prepared.

What are the unique skills frontline leaders are missing as they move into midlevel roles? After analyzing assessment data DDI collected from thousands of leaders making these transitions, as well as the results of our global leadership trend research, we have identified four distinct sets of challenges new middle managers encounter: driving performance in a changing world, managing horizontal integration in a complex organization, leading and developing talent, and making tough decisions about strategy execution.

Although these challenges are not unique to middle manager roles, they are more pervasive and complex at the midlevel. And the basic leadership skills learned in frontline programs aren’t sufficient to tackle these challenges. (See the sidebar on page 56 for the specific competencies that map to each of these four challenges.)

Assumption #2

There are no good options for developing middle managers.

Senior leadership development programs usually entail robust individual assessment and personalized coaching engagements to help executives link their development targets directly to the organization’s key business priorities. As effective as these in-depth development strategies are for senior executives, they often are not scalable for larger groups of midlevel leaders.

At the same time, a classroom-based curriculum designed to impart basic interaction and leadership skills—the accepted approach for developing frontline leaders—is usually too transactional for midlevel leaders. Most midlevel leaders already have years of experience under their belts and require more than the fundamental coaching and delegating skills.

Because neither of these development programs—in their existing form—is workable for midlevel leaders, there is an incorrect assumption that no good alternatives exist, leaving midlevel leaders to learn through trial and error.

ONLY 10 PERCENT OF MIDLEVEL LEADERS FEEL THEY ARE WELL-EQUIPPED TO TAKE ON THE CHALLENGES OF THEIR ROLES.

The reality is that organizations can design highly effective, level-specific development programs for midlevel leaders. Through our leadership development work with numerous organizations, we have seen successful mid-level programs built by adapting key elements of the senior and frontline leader approaches. These successful programs typically have the following three characteristics.

Insight-based learning. Because they have moved beyond foundational skill development, midlevel leaders require learning that focuses less on absorbing content and more on gaining insights into new ways to confront work challenges. As the specifics will vary from person to person, rather than tell leaders what they need to learn, it's best to offer them development experiences that will give them insights about their own capabilities. These include experiences that feature self-assessment tools or exercises, or journaling to capture reflections and impressions on the content and their individual development goals.

Peer learning. Midlevel leaders come to a training event armed with experience and valuable perspectives gathered from across the organization, which provides an invaluable opportunity to enrich the development experience. Whether the midlevel program is focusing on strategy execution, advanced coaching methods, or leading global teams, it can be strengthened by providing explicit opportunities for leaders to network and learn from one another.

Classroom facilitators must be able to generate real-world, business-focused interactions among midlevel leaders across various functions and areas of responsibility. Midlevel leaders benefit—and learn more—by having opportunities to tackle difficult organizational issues together and then further grow these new connections and partnerships when back on the job.

Integration of execution and learning. Midlevel leaders want immediate results; they want to test out and develop their new knowledge while they are still in the classroom. To accomplish this, participants should be asked to bring in actual job challenges. For example,

when learning about leading change, middle managers should work on a change initiative for which they will be accountable. When learning about strategy execution, they should work to prioritize and focus on initiatives and responsibilities linked directly to their organization's strategic priorities.

Assumption #3

Midlevel leadership development does not directly address business issues.

Although this assumption often is correct, our work with organizations has provided convincing evidence that this alignment can, indeed, be achieved—particularly through the use of assessment. For example, a financial services organization we worked with was growing through acquisition and at the same time was facing increasing regulatory pressure. It needed to break down silos and work efficiently across functions to quickly incorporate a number



of community banks into its existing culture. This required midlevel leaders in charge of regional divisions who could drive the integration forward.

After assessing the midlevel leaders to pinpoint their development areas, the company designed a program focused on those areas: competencies related to developing networking and collaboration skills, emotional intelligence (for better interpersonal effectiveness), and change leadership (to address growth and evolving regulatory matters).

By using assessment to ensure alignment, the organization made certain that it was developing skills that were tied directly to the business's strategic direction. The ability to meet head-on senior stakeholders' mistaken assumptions about midlevel leader development often is the difference between getting

a development program funded and having the ongoing buy-in and support required for the program to become sustainable. After all, a program that isn't sustained won't deliver the development renaissance your midlevel leaders truly need.

Developing talent, especially at the midlevel, is a business decision. That means you need to build a strong business case for how developing great midlevel leaders isn't a cost but an investment your organization can't afford not to make. Building that case begins with recognizing the common assumptions outlined here and addressing them by proposing a program that drives real change.

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The Competencies Midlevel Leaders Need to Develop

After analyzing assessment data DDI collected from thousands of leaders making the transition to the midlevel, we identified four critical midlevel leadership challenges. We then identified the competencies that are relevant to those four challenges. Midlevel leaders (or, at the very least, those midlevel leaders identified as high potentials) should be assessed against these competencies to accurately and efficiently target their development.

Midlevel Leadership Challenges	Relevant Competencies
Driving performance in a changing world—Shifting markets, global economies, and accelerated innovations in technology are reducing the cycle time within which leaders must interpret and execute strategy. Midlevel leaders are right in the vortex of a fast-changing business environment and there is no margin for error.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Driving execution • Establishing strategic direction • Leading change • Driving innovation
Managing horizontal integration in a complex organization—Agile strategy execution requires midlevel leaders to maintain and nurture a strong network of partners and collaborators across functions, levels, and geographies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultivating networks • Global acumen • Optimizing diversity • Influence
Leading and developing talent—Midlevel leaders must look beyond their direct reports and strategically identify and develop talent across multiple teams and critical roles under their direction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coaching and developing others • Building emotional talent • Emotional intelligence • Authenticity
Making tough decisions about strategy execution—Midlevel leaders must consider cost, quality, timeliness, and resources as they make decisions about how best to execute strategy. They are in a unique position to observe and report instances where strategies need to be adjusted as those strategies encounter realities at the operational level.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Navigating complexity • Courage • Compelling communication



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T+D is published by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD)

061201.63250

