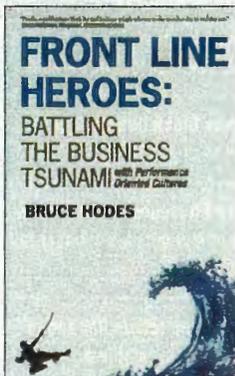


The Tasty Center: Three Strategies for Middle Management

By coordinating efforts between top execs and front-line staff, midlevel managers can play a key role in growth



This article was excerpted from Bruce Hodes' *Front Line Heroes: Battling the Business Tsunami While Developing Performance Oriented Cultures*. Copies are available from TRSA at <http://bit.ly/FrontLineHeroes>.

By Bruce Hodes

I have never been a lover of the sandwich. It sounds un-American and unmanly. However, my lack of interest comes from the bread—the sandwich's top and bottom. What's the purpose? However, I am wildly attracted to the middle of the sandwich. Whether the sandwich is ham and provolone, chicken and mustard, or peanut butter and jelly, for me it's always the middle that dictates how much a sandwich is enjoyed and appreciated.

I can imagine that you think an ode to the middle of sandwiches cannot in any way be related to an article about successfully growing an organization. Stay put and hang in there, as I am truly a genius; here comes the transition.

NEITHER TOP, NOR BOTTOM

In privately held companies of a certain size (50–500 employees), it is the middle—as in management—that is a critical element of a company. We are talking about that layer of leadership and coordination between the top strategic leadership and the front line. It is this middle that will help dictate the firm's long-term success.

This assertion flies in the face of what most business commentators offer. These talking heads focus on the importance of the top of

the company—the Steve Jobs, Jack Welch and Ken Leahy CEOs are all, according to the pundits, apparently single-handedly responsible for the success or demise of their organizations.

Typically, companies of about 50–500 employees or more, have a “middle,” as in management. These field-level decision-makers are important to the success of the overall organization. These employees, now called managers and/or team leaders, are crucial in leading and developing different sectors of the company.

So, what should be done? How is it that a company dealing with today's myriad challenges can also develop a strong middle that aspires to leadership? How is a cast of characters like this developed? Here are three strategies that I have seen utilized by successful companies.

FIRST STRATEGY

Hire people in the middle who have aspirations, who want to grow and develop and are mobile. Thus you have leaders who are eager for opportunity. They are attracted to moving, and working in a new location is attractive for them. What's more, they're excited about establishing a new beachhead for the company.

Create a process in which, as one of its yearly goals and objectives, top leadership has to

Middle Manager Training: 'Moving on Up...'

By Candace Webb, Demand Media

Climbing the professional ladder takes motivation, effort and self-improvement, so you're ready to be promoted when the time comes. One of the benefits of working in a small business is the ability to interact with upper management and showcase your abilities. However, opportunities for advancement may be limited in smaller companies. When a new management position comes open, preparation almost always is a key component for landing the job. Below are some tips to help middle managers enhance their skills and reach for the next level.

Step 1: Volunteer for on-the-job training opportunities. Many companies cross-train employees to prepare them to step in when needed. Volunteering for cross-training in management positions means you will be ready and poised to take over for superiors in times of need. When an opening arises, you'll be ahead of the game.

Step 2: Attend management seminars. Many seminars are designed to prepare attendees to step into middle management positions or higher. Attend these events to send a message that you are interested in advancement and that you've taken the initiative.

Step 3: Continue your education. Obtain a degree, or pursue one of a higher level. Companies pay attention to employees who continue their education, especially if you go for a degree that relates to the business you are in. TRSA's institutes offer great educational and professional networking opportunities too. Consider which program is right for your needs. Options include the Production Management Institute, Maintenance Management Institute and Executive Management Institute. All three provide outstanding training and enhance leadership capabilities. Check TRSA's website at www.trsa.org to learn more.

Step 4: Join local civic organizations. These clubs are filled with upper-management members and owners of businesses in the area. Taking part in the club's activities, networking opportunities and educational opportunities will help groom you for advanced positions.

Step 5: Join a TRSA committee or task force. TRSA committees provide numerous opportunities to work on various projects with industry colleagues from a wide range of companies. Check TRSA's website at www.trsa.org to learn more.

develop and take courses. In one company I worked with, if you could not demonstrate to the CEO that you had improved your skill set and thinking abilities in the last year, you were not eligible for a raise no matter how well you had performed. In another company, if you aspired to be a director, you had to get an MBA. These policies can help a company dramatically grow both revenue and profits.

SECOND STRATEGY

Another way to support the growth and development of the middle is to form a group of middle managers from various (noncompeting) companies. Participants include leaders from different departments: sales executives give input to production and human resource department heads, and so on. There is learning and sharing of different views

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that goes on during these group sessions. I also recommend that companies hire an outside facilitator to oversee these meetings.

I have led this type of middle-manager group. We met for each session at different companies. This allowed participants to see the different facets of the participating organizations. This middle-management group also gained perspective by reading a different book for each session. Members coached one another on issues and concerns brought to the meetings. The coaching model we followed went like this:

A participant presents a problem with which he or she wants coaching and counseling. This is something challenging—a topic on which they want their peers' perspectives.

In "round robin" style, everyone asks questions about the issue. You are only allowed to ask one question at a time. Once the question is asked, the person presenting the issue attempts to answer. Then the next person asks a question.

Once all questions are asked and responded to, it's assumed that everyone now has a better understanding of the issue.

Participants then give coaching and feedback to the person presenting the issue. The participants, in effect, serve as an ad hoc "board of advisers" for each other.

THIRD STRATEGY

One more way of developing the middle is through the establishment of a middle-management development/training program. What this does is bring in talented new hires or promote key employees into a rotation of jobs throughout the company. Rotations can run from six months to a year, and the entire program can last up to two years.

At one company I worked with, the underwriting manager became the claims manager, and the claims manager became the underwriting manager. What was great was that the employees of each department stepped up to support and train their new managers. This had some positive results. By teaching their new bosses, the employees better learned their own disciplines and roles. They also gained experience in managing up and supporting a manager to win. Meanwhile, the new managers got trained in an aspect of the business with which they were unfamiliar. They became better-rounded executives.

At another company, managers formally rotated to sales and production-management positions before being eligible for plant and territory general manager jobs. This type of initiative provides a training and development course that allows em-

ployees to experience and learn about the different facets and aspects of the firm. This makes them more valuable as future leaders of the company.

EXPANDING MY MIDDLE EVEN FURTHER

So there you have it: three strategies you can use to grow the "middle deliciousness" of your company. May you grow and develop it for long-lasting success! Writing this was a workout, and now I am hungry. Give me a chicken and cheese sandwich. Hold the bread. Here is to you and your business middle. **TS**

Bruce Hodes and his company, CMI, Oak Park, IL, help companies of all sizes achieve growth by developing executive leadership teams, business leaders and executives into powerful performers. He also was a speaker at last month's TRSA Annual Conference & Exhibits in Chicago. Contact him at bhodes@cmiteamwork.com, 800.883.7995 or at cmiteamwork.com.

FIRST COMPACT WASHING, THEN SMART TREATING



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