

# Lead from the Middle

*Influence up, down, and across.*



by Steve Arneson

**T**HE REAL CHALLENGE of leading people falls to middle managers. Today, it's the leaders in the middle who must communicate and execute strategy, solve problems, create efficiencies, and manage performance. This is where the leadership rubber meets the road, providing the link between the CEO's vision and execution. Fortunately, most lessons of leadership provide a blueprint for you. You've learned to clarify expectations, empower employees, and provide feedback; however, to broaden your influence and impact, you need to adopt four macro practices:

**1. Do your homework.** If you've come up through the ranks, you know about your team and how it impacts the company. You know your group's purpose and key metrics. But do you know much about other departments? If you're in Finance, do you know what happens in Operations or IT, and how these groups contribute to the company's success? As a leader, you need to see how the pieces fit together so that you can identify opportunities for process improvement, innovation, and revenue growth. And, you need to ensure that your department is partnering effectively with other areas. How can you best learn about other groups? Attend other departments' communication sessions. Read their postings on the intranet site. Sign up for an executive speaker event where the group's leader is presenting. Ask your manager for other departments' annual strategy presentation or progress reports. Or find a peer in that department and set up a few "cross-education" sessions. Invite a peer to lunch and explain your goal of learning more about his or her department; most fellow managers will share their group's goals. In short, network laterally with a purpose. You're not just establishing relationships and influencing other departments, you're building insight into how the company works to gain a holistic view!

**2. Expand the team's horizontal view.** From your vantage point, you

know that people want to learn, grow, develop their knowledge, and understand the organization. You also know that sharing information makes them more engaged and helps spark innovation. Beyond promoting the corporate university and encouraging individual self-development, take the team on a new learning journey—one that gives them insight into how their work impacts the rest of the organization.

At your next team meeting, invite a leader from another department to share their groups' structure, goals, and challenges. Leave time for Q&A, and ensure the leader outlines how your department can help make them more successful. Create a "shadow program" with another department, assigning employees to spend a day with a peer learning about that team's work (perhaps this can



be a rewards-based program for top performers). Take advantage of internal customer immersion programs, so your team knows what it's like to interact with customers. Invite key employees to observe your cross-functional meetings to see how you interact with your peers. Engage the team in brainstorming key service metrics, and assemble a balanced scorecard of how well they're partnering with other departments. You can show your team how they fit into the larger picture in many ways. Structure what will work best for your group. Your goal is to get your people looking left and right—building a commitment to greater partnerships. When employees better understand how their work makes a difference, they'll raise their game and create a stronger company.

**3. Make a vertical connection.** Also connect the team by creating a strong vertical link to your department's purpose and goals. As a leader, you are responsible for communicating the

department's mission and objectives, and connecting those with the company's strategy. Aligning the team vertically takes discipline and perseverance.

Information needs to be communicated many times in multiple ways to be fully absorbed. You'll need to over-communicate in creative ways to keep your team connected to the mission. Hold regular update meetings with the team to share the strategy, and brief the team on the latest metrics or results. Invite senior leaders to your team meetings to talk about the department's goals, and encourage employees to ask questions. Assign employees to make presentations to their colleagues about their group's goals and progress. Use your intranet portal to post the strategy, goals and objectives, and update them. Quiz direct reports regularly about the key components of the mission and strategy. Establish "skip-level" meetings for your people to have conversations with your manager about the strategy. Invite the CEO to your meetings to share how the company is performing.

Keep the mission, goals and strategy top of mind for your team. Ensure that your employees know why they're coming to work each day, and how their work is helping to achieve department and company goals.

**4. Represent your best talent.** Beyond connecting the team to the mission (upward alignment) and exposing the team to other departments (lateral learning), you must focus down, on the team (serving others). You already know several best practices for motivating and inspiring the troops, and you're likely good at coaching and developing your best players. Now let your top performers shine on their own to influence how the rest of the organization views your top talent.

Take your best people to meetings with your managers or senior leaders, and let them make the presentations. Send them to cross-functional meetings. Make sure they're getting exposure to other leaders by pairing them with mentors. Represent them at talent review meetings or in conversations with the CEO. Let them lead key portions of your meetings with the full team, or lead committees. Recommend them for new assignments. Be known as a net exporter of talent.

By excelling at the four practices, you maximize your leadership impact. **LE**

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**ACTION:** Excel at these four practices.