

“The Death or Resurrection of Middle Managers?”



Weekly Learnings 43 / 2023

I read a book on middle management by three McKinsey professionals. Here is the link to the [book summary](#). This book made me think about what's happening with Middle managers. Here are my learnings:

1. Middle management started with the first Industrial Revolution in textiles, steel manufacturing, and auto manufacturing and is being challenged in the 4th and 5th Industrial revolutions.
2. Gurus like Frederick Taylor, Peter Drucker, Deming, and Max Weber studied organisations and the role of middle management and discussed structures, hierarchy, span of control and power.
3. Middle managers are like half-backs in a football team, they take the ball from the backs (senior management) and pass it to the forwards (frontline). They do most of the running on the pitch. A typical midfielder runs 10 km in a match. They also defend the ball from competition attacks and play to a plan.
4. Structure changes like matrix organisations, regional HQs etc have made many organisations question the role of middle management. So, when a company is in trouble, it cuts middle management and bundles jobs in meaningless ways.
5. The problem is not with middle management; it is with senior management and company philosophy. Senior management is responsible for a bloated middle management since senior managers cannot have his/her grades or job titles without sufficient people reporting to them. This led to the bloating and technology led to the shedding.
6. Indian legacy companies have many layers of middle managers since they think people costs are low. They will be surprised this decade. MNCs have all moved from about 15 layers to less than 8 to 10 from the top to the bottom in the last decade. This is the flatter organisation model made famous by Jack Welch.
7. New-age tech companies have grown faster and flatter and don't value middle management. Middle management is like the junior commissioned officers in the armed

forces, they are a vital link to strategy, change, communication, and training. Leaders and HR should spend more time with middle managers.

8. I have always valued middle managers since they are the process owners, they know when something is going to go wrong, and they can see the signs in the numbers and the information flow. They control and are controlled; they are resisted and resisters too. The big danger of middle managers is staying true to being the organisation person versus being seen as a mouthpiece for senior managers.
9. The pandemic and remote working have got a sharper focus on middle management. As work gets distributed and redistributed, a company needs more effective co-ordinating middle managers and not less. Their role and energy need to be rethought in a tech world.
10. Middle managers in India work best in a hierarchy model where they are clear about whose interests they serve; middle managers struggle when there are multiple stakeholders.

Shiv

www.shivshivakumar.com

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