



THE FUTURE OF MIDDLE MANAGEMENT

A Future Work Forum Report

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Executive Summary

Middle management, long criticised as bureaucratic, expensive, and resistant to change, is now re-emerging as one of the most strategically important layers in modern organisations. With the rise of AI, hybrid work, global uncertainty, and increasing organisational complexity, the traditional command-and-control manager is indeed outdated, but eliminating middle management would remove the very human capability organisations now depend upon most: sense-making, relational connection, collaboration design, coaching, and system coherence.

The future of middle management is not hierarchical oversight, but human and systemic leadership from the centre, turning strategy into meaning, autonomy into alignment, and digital capacity into value creation.

Across research, expert perspectives, case studies and experience, several shared conclusions emerge:

- Middle management is not disappearing, it is transforming, from overseer to coach, from control to connection, from instruction to influence.
- AI replaces administrative oversight, not human interpretation, the human role becomes coaching, cultural navigation, ethical judgement and collaboration.
- Removing middle management without redesigning work leads to burnout, fragmentation and cultural deterioration.
- Modern managers require upgraded capabilities: emotional regulation, systemic thinking, digital fluency, coaching, and collaborative intelligence.
- Careers will become network-based, not ladder-based, growth through breadth, not rank.
- Organisations that succeed will measure trust, collaboration, learning velocity and purpose alignment, not just output.

In essence, middle management becomes the connective tissue: the integrative layer where meaning, belonging, purpose, performance and innovation take shape. The next decade will not be defined by fewer managers but by better prepared and differently positioned ones.

The future is not “no middle management”. The future is better middle management, redesigned as leadership in the middle.”

Short chapter overview

(1) From Paralyzing Layer to Empowering Backbone

Middle management is not disappearing but transforming from operational oversight into human-centric leadership. In an uncertain, AI-driven environment, middle managers create value by translating strategy, stabilizing culture, and helping employees navigate complexity. Their future role is less about authority and more about connection, coaching, and adaptive leadership.

(2) From Manager to Sense-Maker

Middle managers must evolve into interpreters of complexity who help teams understand and respond to uncertain systems. Effective leaders regulate emotions, see systemic interdependencies, and foster alignment across organizational boundaries. Their core function becomes sense-making rather than control.

(3) The Middle Management Renaissance

AI removes administrative work but increases the need for human leadership focused on coaching, connection, and judgment. The traditional supervisor model is obsolete for knowledge workers. Future middle managers act as catalysts who enable collaboration, learning, and performance.

(4) Beyond the Ladder

Corporate careers are shifting from hierarchical ladders to network-based development paths. Success will depend on learning agility, cross-functional breadth, and the ability to combine EQ, IQ, and AI capabilities. Influence and contribution will matter more than formal titles.

(5) From Hierarchical Translator to Hybrid Conductor

As organizational structures flatten and AI becomes embedded in work, middle managers must orchestrate collaboration between humans and intelligent systems. Their value lies in maintaining communication flows and relational connectivity across complex networks. They become conductors of collaborative intelligence.

(6) Developing Future-Fit Middle Managers

Organizations must radically rethink how they develop middle managers. Future-ready leaders require resilience, systems thinking, coaching capability, and digital confidence. Development should be experiential, relational, and embedded in real business challenges.

(7) Working Relationships

The effectiveness of middle managers increasingly depends on their ability to maintain strong relationships in hybrid and distributed environments. Communication, coaching, digital literacy, and boundary-spanning leadership are critical capabilities. Trust and accessibility become central leadership assets.

(8) Driving Real Value for Stakeholders

Middle managers play a key role in connecting employees, customers, suppliers, and organizational purpose. Their proximity to operations allows them to translate strategy into tangible stakeholder value. They are also essential for making AI initiatives deliver real business outcomes.

(9) Middle Managers as Architects of Collaboration

In networked organizations, middle managers design the conditions for collaboration, trust, and collective intelligence. They act as connectors who align people, technology, and purpose. Their leadership focuses on influence, communication fluency, and ethical presence.

(10) Self-Managed Teams

While self-managed teams are gaining popularity, middle managers remain important for coordination, support, and alignment. Organizations often underestimate the complexity of removing managerial layers. Effective transformation requires redefining rather than eliminating the middle role.

(11) Developing New Leaders

Middle managers play a crucial role in identifying and developing the next generation of leaders. Through coaching, mentoring, and role modelling, they shape leadership pipelines. Leadership development therefore increasingly happens in the middle of the organization.

(12) Rewarding Middle Managers in the Future

As managerial roles become more distributed and less hierarchical, reward systems must evolve. Organizations will need new ways to measure value creation beyond control and headcount. Compensation and recognition should reflect influence, collaboration, and system impact.

1. From Paralyzing Layer to Empowering Backbone: Reclaiming the Value of Middle Management (Matthias Mölleney)

Key Takeaways

- Middle management is not disappearing but transforming from operational oversight to human-centric leadership.
- AI, hybrid work and systemic volatility redefine the value creation role of managers.
- Removing this layer without redesign raises burnout, fragmentation, and cultural erosion.
- Future skills shift from authority to connection, translation, and adaptive leadership.

Core Message

Middle managers remain mission-critical, but their value shifts from supervision to strategic translation, human coherence, cultural stability and adaptive meaning-making.

Who hasn't heard the old stories about the paralyzing layer of the enterprise? Not a cost-cutting exercise goes by without the brake-pedal pushers and naysayers on the middle floors being targeted. The criticism became more pronounced when everyone was talking about agility and breaking down hierarchies. This phase has now come to an end, or at least has taken a long pause, as times have become more uncertain, and fears of recession have returned. As a result, many management teams are no longer in the mood for participatory experiments but expect everyone to roll up their sleeves and do more to increase productivity.

It is still a little unclear what middle management, which until recently stood in the way of the desired reduction in hierarchy, should do now. First, they are expected to help increase productivity; second, they are expected to provide guidance in a time of general uncertainty; and third, they are expected to drive digitization. All this under enormous cost pressure.

You can try to ask middle management to do all this, but they won't want to and won't be able to if the song of the paralyzing layer continues to be sung. We desperately need an appreciation initiative for middle management, and I don't mean just praise, but an appreciation of the value of these leaders.

This does not mean a return to the old, transactional, command-and-control approaches to management. No company has ever become more competitive through more control and more power. What we need is a new definition of the role of leaders in the tension between strategic goals and the need of employees to find orientation in a general sense of uncertainty.

A general sense of uncertainty, as we are currently experiencing in many areas, usually leads to collective exhaustion, and there are already clear signs of this. Before this exhaustion becomes even more pronounced, we need a leadership team that does not allow itself to be infected by the tendency toward exhaustion, but instead takes on a strong, new leadership role in which it leads not from the front, as in the past, but from the back. It is a leadership in which excellence and humility are not contradictory, and in which the demands on oneself are always at least as high as those on others.

To achieve this, we must understand the value of such leadership and, above all, adjust the rules of promotion. As long as we talk about social skills but still favour those with the greatest technical expertise when it comes to promotions, we will not make the breakthrough. We need managers who, before setting out on a difficult mountain hike with their insecure employees, can give them a sense of what it is like to stand at the summit and have the effort of the climb pay off. If they can only define, measure and control performance goals, they will hardly reach the summit with their employees, and certainly not over and over again.

How do scholars and other experts look at the future of Middle Management?

1.1. What's the Future of Middle Management?

(Gretchen Gavett & Vasundhara Sawhney, Harvard Business Review, April 2025)¹

Despite recurring predictions of its demise, middle management remains sizable and vital. The article notes that the share of middle managers in the U.S. workforce grew from ~9.2 % in 1983 to ~13 % in 2022. It argues that technology and flatter structures are forcing a redefinition, not elimination, of the role. Middle managers are increasingly acting as translators of strategy, cultural anchors, and human connectors. As routine tasks get automated, their value lies in sense-making, facilitating change, and amplifying human judgment.

Middle management isn't disappearing, it's evolving. The transformation requires new competencies (e.g. digital fluency, coaching, interpretive leadership) rather than just cost cutting.

1.2. Is there still value in the role of managers?

(Deloitte Insights, April 2025)²

Deloitte questions both extremes, wholly eliminating managers or keeping them unchanged, and proposes reinventing the role. They argue that AI and other support systems can offload the administrative burden, freeing managers to focus on:

- developing, coaching, motivating and nurturing their people
- redesigning work and optimizing human–machine interaction
- enabling agility, strategic problem solving, and innovation

However, they warn that radical flattening (“unbossing”) can introduce ambiguities in decision rights, new bureaucracies, or shadow leadership dynamics. Future middle management must pivot away from control tasks toward relational, strategic, and design-oriented roles.

1.3. Burnout By Design: How Cutting Middle Management Affects Company Culture

(Tracy Lawrence, Forbes, April 2025)³

This article explores the unintended cultural and operational consequences of removing layers of middle management. Among the effects:

- Rising burnout, because remaining managers absorb more work and pressure
- Loss of coaching, feedback, and mentorship that middle managers often provide
- Weaker communication, morale decline, and increased strain on employees and leadership

Cutting middle management “in design” rather than transforming it may backfire. Use it to balance enthusiasm for flattening with the human risks involved.

1.4. Middle Managers: The Overlooked Leaders Who Hold Organizations Together

(Dr. Cynthia J. Young, Forbes, September 2025)⁴

This more recent article highlights how middle managers serve as stabilizers, connecting strategy to execution, holding teams accountable, and influencing engagement. It argues that organizations that fail to recognize and support this layer risk losing alignment, agility, and coherence.

Middle managers often do the work of “making things run” in organizations, even when they’re not visible.

1.5. The Middle Manager of the Future: More Coaching, Less Commanding

(Ben Rand, Harvard Business School Working Knowledge, February 2024)⁵

Analysis of job postings (35 million) reveals increasing demand for midlevel managers with coaching, facilitation, and change skills rather than traditional command-and-control attributes. The article suggests that managerial success will increasingly depend on enabling team performance, removing obstacles, and dynamically reconfiguring work.

Future middle managers will require less directive, more enabling profiles and training.

1.6. The Future of Middle Management

(Brian Hancock, Lucia Rahilly, Bill Schaninger, McKinsey, August 2023)⁶

McKinsey emphasizes that middle managers continue to be “the single biggest determinant of employee satisfaction, performance, and perceptions of well-being.” Yet, much of their time is still consumed by administrative burden (roughly 25 % is said to be “admin work”). In the context of increasing complexity, volatility, and AI augmentation, McKinsey (and affiliated authors) argue the role should shift toward coaching, strategy translation, and enabling autonomy.

Both the importance of middle managers and the need to free them (through redesign and support) from administrative overload is important.

1.7. Middle Management Is the Key to Sustainability

(Andrew Winston, Paul Polman & Jeff Seabright, Harvard Business Review, Nov/Dec 2023)

This article positions middle managers as critical levers in embedding sustainability into the core operations of HR, procurement, marketing, finance, R&D, etc. Because they operate close to execution, they have the influence to integrate environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices in daily decisions.

Beyond digital and application of AI, middle managers can also drive sustainability, making them pivotal not just in performance but also in ethical, long-term transformations.

2. From Manager to Sense-Maker (Samreen McGregor)

Key Takeaways

- Leadership moves from command and control to emotional regulation, relational attunement, and systemic awareness.
- Managers must expand intervention styles beyond instruction to coaching, catalytic guidance and reflection.
- Physiological self-regulation becomes a foundational leadership skill in complexity.
- Managers must perceive interdependencies and consequences across system boundaries.

Core Message

Modern leadership requires managers to become interpreters of complexity, capable of grounding themselves, sensing the system, and enabling meaningful collective alignment.

Middle managers occupy one of the most critical yet misunderstood layers of organisational life, translating strategic intent into operational execution while holding tension across levels.

Historically, their role centred on oversight, coordination and control to execute strategy and ensure compliance. However, in complex and interdependent environments, the real value of middle management lies in sense-making – the capacity to interpret complexity, align meaning, work with embodied responses and enable coherence in uncertain systems. A 2023 McKinsey survey⁷ found that fewer than 30% of middle managers feel empowered to make decisions independently, despite carrying most execution risk - a clear strain between expectation and autonomy.

The demands on middle managers today are qualitatively different: they must deliver outcomes while sustaining coherence, creating conditions for teams to self-organise, adapt and collaborate. This shift represents a transition from manager to sense-maker...from controlling complexity to interpreting it.

2.1. From Control to Connection

Traditional management models rewarded order and predictability. The emphasis has been on enforcing standards and minimising deviation, a function that often relied on authority and proximity. Yet as organisations become more adaptive, distributed and

reliant on cross-functional interdependence, control mechanisms alone constrain performance.

In my work with a multi-sector infrastructure and engineering organisation responsible for maintaining critical national utilities, several leaders described feeling caught in the crossfire” - accountable to senior expectations while absorbing operational pressure from their teams. During one session, a project manager described spending as much time managing emotional fallout between teams as coordinating technical delivery. “It’s like running two projects,” he said “one in the field, one in people’s heads.” This experience of being pulled in multiple directions reflects what Ronald Heifetz refers to as *adaptive leadership*⁸: the capacity to navigate complex challenges that lack clear solutions. In such contexts, control and compliance can create paralysis. What is required instead is connection: the capacity to sense, interpret and respond systemically and from an embodied state.

Expanding the Range of Intervention

John Heron’s (1990) six-category model of intervention⁹ offers a useful framework for understanding how the managerial repertoire must evolve. Traditional management has relied on prescriptive and informative interventions, but complex systems require more catalytic, supportive and confronting approaches, demanding self-awareness and emotional regulation.

Developing this capacity begins with what psychiatrist and interpersonal neurobiologist Daniel Siegel (2010) terms ‘integration’¹⁰: the linking of differentiated parts into a coherent whole. Managers who can regulate their own physiological and emotional states are better able to hold uncertainty, listen deeply and create conditions in which others can think clearly. This capacity for nervous system regulation, supported by evidence from groundbreaking neuroscience research shows that leaders who practise regulated breathing demonstrate greater prefrontal activation and improved team perception of safety (Boyatzis et al., 2019¹¹). This is emerging as a core leadership competency.

2.2. Seeing the System

While emotional and somatic intelligence are essential, they must be complemented by cognitive systems thinking, or the ability to perceive interconnections and patterns beyond the immediate task environment. Donella Meadows (2008)¹² describes this as “seeing the system from above”: recognising feedback loops, time delays and leverage points. Developing this breadth of awareness enables managers to practice sense-making in real time – staying curious, grounded and responsive rather than reactive.

In practice, this involves cultivating what Peter Senge (1990)¹³ calls “systems literacy”: the ability to identify how individual actions contribute to collective outcomes. In a recent session, participants mapped how design bottlenecks affected operations, client satisfaction and revenue. Seeing this pattern shifted the conversation from blame to

inquiry and moves from reacting within the system to observing and influencing the system itself.

2.3. Managing Energy, Meaning and Polarity

The emotional and relational dimensions of this role cannot be overstated. Middle managers often act as shock absorbers for organisational anxiety, particularly during transformation. Their ability to stay grounded while holding others' uncertainty stabilises the wider system.

This aligns with the concept of *social contagion* in affective neuroscience: emotions are transmitted through physiological cues such as tone, posture and rhythm. A manager's ability to regulate their own state therefore has a direct impact on team dynamics. In this sense, leadership presence is both a relational and biological phenomenon.

At a subtler level, this transition also involves the integration of feminine and masculine energies in leadership: a theme explored across Jungian and integral leadership literature (e.g. Rohr, 2011¹⁴; Wilber, 2000¹⁵). The masculine principle emphasises structure, direction and control; the feminine brings receptivity, intuition and relational attunement. Effective leadership balances the two: firmness without rigidity, compassion without collapse.

The new paradigm of middle management calls for *integration* rather than opposition, what David Hawkins (2005)¹⁶ describes as an “energetic calibration” toward coherence, where clarity and compassion coexist.

Garrett Hardin's (1968)¹⁷ metaphor of the tragedy of the commons also applies here. When each department optimises for its own performance, the collective system suffers depletion. Middle managers, positioned at the intersection of local and global interests, are uniquely placed to identify where individual optimisation undermines collective value. This requires moral courage and the willingness to privilege system health over local expediency.

2.4. From Compliance to Coherence

As middle managers evolve into coaches, their success will depend on three interrelated capabilities:

1. **Physiological regulation** - awareness of how the body signals stress and using simple grounding techniques (for example, paced breathing, centring attention on the breath or feet, short breaks before meetings) to restore calm under pressure.
2. **Relational attunement** – cultivating presence and deep listening. This means slowing the impulse to respond, noticing tone and body language and creating moments of genuine pause so others feel heard.

3. **Systemic cognition** – developing the habit of noticing ripple effects. Step back regularly to observe how one team's decisions shape outcomes for others and name those interdependencies out loud to your peers.

Practised together, these three capacities become the foundation of sense-making in leadership: helping managers move from reacting to complexity toward generating coherence and collective intelligence. The aim is not simply to manage output, but to facilitate *flow* within individuals and teams so this ripples intentionally across systems.

2.5. Building Organisational Capacity

To embed this transformation, organisations must reimagine their developmental architecture so that coaching, reflection and embodiment are part of daily work, not peripheral interventions. Structures and metrics must evolve to recognise how results are achieved, not only what is delivered. Senior leaders play a critical role in modelling this shift by demonstrating vulnerability, curiosity and systemic awareness, thereby legitimising these behaviours across the hierarchy. Conversely, when short-term control continues to be rewarded, middle managers revert to defensive routines.

The evolution from manager to sense-maker is therefore not only an individual challenge but a systemic one. It requires organisations to move from managing performance to cultivating coherence, a shift in both mindset and method. As Donella Meadows (2008)¹⁸ reminds us, the deepest leverage point in any system lies in changing the paradigm from which it operates.

Ultimately, this evolution is both personal and systemic. As middle managers learn to regulate energy, sense interconnection and hold polarity, they embody the coherence their systems seek.

3. The Middle Management Renaissance: From Overseers to Catalysts in the AI-Powered Workplace (Jennifer Vessels)

Key Takeaways

- AI eliminates administrative burden, enabling humans to focus on coaching, judgment, ethics and collaboration.
- Traditional supervisory models are obsolete — knowledge workers require trust and autonomy, not oversight.
- The new middle manager becomes a coach, connector and champion rather than a controller.
- The role expands in value rather than shrinks but requires a full mindset reboot.

Core Message

The future middle manager is a catalyst who amplifies human potential in AI-enhanced environments, not a supervisor protecting old mechanisms of control.

Middle management must change—and it's a crisis rooted in outdated thinking.

Over the past three post-pandemic years, AI adoption and advanced technologies have accelerated by 5000% according to Deloitte, fundamentally redefining not just tasks but the very nature of work itself. Yet paradoxically, leaders in organizations globally are responding by demanding compliance with "return to work" policies reminiscent of Industrial Age factories—as if knowledge work still requires bodies in specific locations at specific times, standing at metaphorical production lines.

This disconnect isn't just tone-deaf. It's existential.

The battle over where people work has obscured a far more critical question: What is the future of work?

I believe it is a world in which people collaborate in teams to achieve their individual and collective purpose, ie a common goal often amplified and supported by AI that handles the daily tasks.

In that arena, is the role of middle managers?

The Industrial Age Model Is Dead—Stop Pretending Otherwise

In the factory era, middle managers existed to oversee employees doing company dictated tasks, ensuring each step was executed correctly according to specifications.

Workers did the work. Managers made sure it was done properly. The system made sense when work meant following prescribed steps on production lines.

That world is gone.

Today's reality looks nothing like that model:

Knowledge workers don't follow instructions—they solve problems. The vast majority of employees across industries are hired for their ability to analyze, create, sell, support, and innovate. They bring experience, creativity, and judgment to ambiguous challenges. They don't need someone telling them which button to press; they need someone helping them navigate complexity.

AI doesn't need supervision. AI's methodical, mathematical process learns, stores, and executes prescribed tasks with perfect consistency. The irony? The thing we're told to "manage" now manages itself better than any human ever could.

Oversight kills performance. Multiple studies, including research from Gallup and Harvard Business Review, demonstrate that micromanagement and excessive oversight actively *reduce* productivity, employee engagement, and work quality. Knowledge workers require flexibility in *how* they achieve results. The most successful and satisfied employees are those trusted to perform with minimal management interference.

Gen Z demands a different contract. As this generation floods the workplace, the expectation isn't just flexibility—it's trust, coaching, and purpose over hierarchy and control. They've grown up with technology as an extension of themselves. They don't need someone looking over their shoulder; they need someone investing in their growth.

The Uncomfortable Truth: Traditional Middle Management is obsolete

Here's what organizations must accept: The Industrial Age concept of middle management—people hired to tell others what to do and watch them do it—is finished.

People don't need overseers. AI handles the repetitive, detailed, scripted work. Human employees are expected to create, innovate, leverage resources across the organization, solve complex problems, delight customers, and drive competitive advantage. None of that happens through supervision. All of it requires something entirely different.

So, what DO we need?

The Essential Role: Coaches, Connectors, and Champions

The question isn't whether middle management has a future. It's whether we're bold enough to completely reimagine what middle management means.

In the emerging world of work, organizations need three distinct layers—and all three are essential:

Executive leaders set the North Star—the vision, direction, and strategic objectives that define where the company is heading.

Frontline creators are the developers, problem-solvers, sellers, and service providers who use AI and advanced tools to move the company forward, one initiative at a time, toward that North Star.

And in between? We need coaches, champions, and connectors—the people who aren't setting enterprise strategy or building the solutions, but who enable everyone else to perform at their highest level.

This is the reimagined middle manager: the catalyst who makes transformation possible.

From Control to Catalyst: The New Middle Management Mandate

Future-ready middle managers don't manage in the traditional sense. They:

Coach employees to leverage AI and technology effectively, navigate ambiguity, and develop skills for challenges that don't exist yet. They ask powerful questions instead of giving prescriptive answers.

Connect people across the organization to resources, expertise, and opportunities. They break down silos, facilitate collaboration, and ensure knowledge workers have access to everything they need to innovate.

Champion accomplishments, celebrate wins, and advocate for their teams. They amplify successes, provide air cover for experimentation, and create psychological safety for calculated risks.

Clarify objectives and desired outcomes without dictating the "how." They translate executive vision into actionable context while trusting their teams to determine the best path forward.

In this capacity, middle management isn't just valuable—it's mission-critical. AI can't coach. Technology can't champion. Automation can't connect people across organizational boundaries or provide the human insight that transforms good work into breakthrough innovation.

Business as Usual Is Obsolete—And That's a Good Thing

The organizations thriving in this accelerated landscape aren't clinging to Industrial Age management models. They're not demanding people return to offices to be supervised. They're not treating middle managers as expensive overhead to be eliminated.

They're doing something revolutionary: They're liberating middle managers from administrative burden and empowering them to focus entirely on developing, connecting, and championing their people.

When AI handles scheduling, reporting, and routine processes, middle managers can finally do what they were always meant to do—just on a completely different playing field. The role isn't shrinking; it's expanding into something more human, more impactful, and more essential than ever.

The Choice: Evolution or Extinction

Today's greatest obstacle to future success isn't change itself. It's fear—specifically, the fear of abandoning what's familiar even when it's demonstrably obsolete.

Demanding return-to-office compliance feels like control. Cutting middle management feels like efficiency. Maintaining Industrial Age hierarchies feels like stability.

None of it is real. All of it is fear masquerading as leadership.

The future belongs to organizations brave enough to reimagine middle management as coaches, connectors, and champions—and to trust knowledge workers amplified by AI to create the future together.

The new world is emerging whether we're ready or not. AI is accelerating at rates we can barely comprehend. Gen Z is rewriting workplace expectations. Knowledge work has permanently evolved beyond supervision.

The question isn't whether middle management has a role in this future. It's whether YOUR organization will transform that role quickly enough to survive what's coming.

The time for transformation isn't tomorrow. It's now.

4. Beyond the Ladder: Redefining Corporate Careers in a World Without Middle Management (Stuart Neilson)

Key Takeaways

- Careers shift from hierarchical ladders to lateral, network and capability-based paths.
- Success is measured by contribution, learning velocity and system influence, not title or rank.
- Breadth and adaptability become key status markers for sustainable employability.
- EQ-IQ-AI fluency becomes the new holistic intelligence model for careers.

Core Message

Career progression becomes a fluid, multidirectional journey driven by value creation and learning agility, replacing the linear “climb the ladder” paradigm.

The traditional corporate career ladder has long been a symbol of stability, progress, and prestige. You joined a company, learned the ropes, took on increasing responsibility, and gradually climbed the rungs toward middle management, often seen as the gateway to influence, higher pay, and the executive suite.

But as organisations evolve to meet the demands of a faster, flatter, and more fluid world, that middle layer is disappearing. The “manager of managers” is giving way to autonomous teams, AI-supported decision-making, and network-based collaboration. The question many professionals now ask is: *What does a corporate career look like when there are no middle management jobs to aim for?*

4.1. The End of the Ladder and the Rise of the Network

This flattening of organisations isn’t just a structural shift it’s a philosophical one. Companies are realising that innovation and agility thrive when people are trusted to act, experiment, and learn, not when they are constrained by bureaucracy. The result is a corporate environment where influence replaces authority, and contribution outweighs title.

Without middle management, there will be fewer “steps” to climb but far more directions in which to grow.

In the age of intelligent systems, where AI holds and evolves much of the world’s knowledge, the human advantage will no longer come from what you *know* but from how you *adapt, execute, and lead together*. In flatter, more fluid organisations, career growth won’t be defined by titles or reporting lines. Instead, it will hinge on three things, your ability to integrate knowledge into human contexts, the real world impact of your contributions, and your capacity to lead with both emotional and cognitive intelligence.

Human adaptation will become the new competitive edge. As AI masters technical knowledge and execution speed, people will need to master learning agility, ethical reasoning, and how to apply machine-generated insights to human challenges. Those who can translate AI’s intelligence into empathy driven solutions will become invaluable.

Impact will remain the truest measure of value. Recognition and reward will flow to those who use AI and collective intelligence to create measurable outcomes not those who manage headcount. The person who helps a team co-create a breakthrough or align around purpose will be more influential than one holding a traditional leadership title.

Collaborative agility will define future leaders. Non-hierarchical teams thrive on trust, shared purpose, and emotional intelligence. The most effective leaders will not command they will connect and respect, orchestrating diverse human and machine inputs, nurturing resilience, and helping others grow through change.

In this new landscape, EQ and IQ converge. AI may hold the knowledge, but humans will hold the wisdom, the ability to adapt, to empathise, and to lead others in turning information into impact.

And finally, agility will be a defining career trait. The ability to pivot between roles, projects, or even disciplines will be seen not as a sign of inconsistency but as evidence of adaptability and range.

4.2. Lateral is the New Up

For decades, careers were built on a single, linear narrative: move up or move out. But as middle management disappears, “up” will no longer be the only or even the most valuable direction of growth.

Instead, lateral movement across functions will become the hallmark of a fulfilling and successful career. Professionals might spend time in product development, then move into customer strategy, operations, or data science. Each move will broaden their perspective and deepen their understanding of how the organisation truly operates.

This kind of functional versatility will not only keep careers dynamic and engaging it will also create a generation of leaders who are genuinely rounded, commercially fluent, and empathetic to the diverse challenges across the business.

In the old model, many senior executives rose through narrow verticals, sometimes lacking exposure to the broader ecosystem. The future model will reverse that. Tomorrow's leaders will emerge not from climbing a ladder, but from navigating a lattice.

4.3. Redefining Success and Status

If there are no middle managers, what becomes of status, recognition, and reward?

The symbols of corporate success corner offices, titles, and reserved parking spaces are already fading. In their place will be a new kind of prestige, being the go to expert, the trusted collaborator, the problem solver everyone wants on their team.

Salaries and recognition will increasingly reflect contribution rather than hierarchy. The individual who designs a new process that saves millions will be rewarded more than someone who simply occupies a managerial title. Performance metrics will become more transparent, objective, and tied to outcomes rather than tenure.

More importantly, fulfillment will come less from hierarchy and more from purpose and growth. People will measure their careers by the diversity of experiences they've had, the problems they've solved, and the impact they've made rather than the job titles they've collected.

4.4. The Role of Technology in a Flatter World

Artificial intelligence, automation, and advanced analytics are accelerating this shift. AI can now handle many of the traditional responsibilities of middle managers such as resource allocation, scheduling, performance tracking, and workflow optimisation freeing humans to focus on creativity, strategy, and innovation.

Technology is also enabling more transparent and meritocratic systems. In flatter structures, digital platforms can track contributions, visualise collaboration networks, and identify where real value is being created. This helps organisations reward contribution accurately, and it allows individuals to showcase their impact in real time.

Rather than fearing technology as a job destroyer, professionals who embrace it will find that it amplifies their ability to contribute meaningfully and to be recognised for that contribution.

4.5. Building a Career in the New Corporate Landscape

So, what does it mean to build a career when there are no middle managers? It means rethinking what we're aiming for.

Invest in skills, not titles. Continuous learning will be the foundation of career success. The half-life of skills is shrinking, and those who remain curious and proactive about reskilling will thrive.

Pursue breadth as well as depth. Lateral moves will expand your perspective and make you more valuable. Seek experiences that challenge you to think differently and solve new types of problems.

Cultivate influence, not authority. Leadership in flatter organisations will be earned through credibility, collaboration, and contribution not through hierarchy.

Define your own version of success. Without traditional rungs to climb, career satisfaction will come from growth, autonomy, and impact.

Be visible and measurable. Learn to communicate your impact clearly through data, outcomes, and storytelling. In a contribution-based world, visibility matters.

4.6. A Whole New Career Language Will Emerge

Recruiters will change the way they roles are communicated, they will focus on skills, potential, and demonstrated impact rather than prior job titles, with AI-driven assessments and project-based evaluations helping match individuals to roles where they can add the most value. Promotion and role expansion will happen laterally and organically, based on measurable contributions, mastery of new functions, and peer team recognition, rather than waiting for hierarchical openings.

4.7. A Future of Empowered Careers

The disappearance of middle management is not a loss it's an evolution. It represents a shift from managing people to empowering people, from climbing ladders to exploring networks, from pursuing status to creating value.

As organisations flatten, the opportunity for individual growth expands. The future corporate career will be more fluid, more flexible, and far more fulfilling. It will reward curiosity, courage, and contribution over conformity.

It will be a true meritocracy. In flatter systems, expertise replaces hierarchy as the main source of influence. People gain authority because they know how to solve problems or create value not because they occupy a higher spot on the org chart.

This dynamic encourages genuine meritocracy because subject matter experts can lead without needing a managerial title, teams self-organise around capability rather than reporting lines and high performers can expand their impact horizontally (through projects or networks) rather than waiting for a promotion slot to open up.

For those willing to embrace agility, continuous learning, and lateral growth, the path ahead is not narrower it's wider than ever before...and potentially in a healthier, less politically driven environment.

5. From Hierarchical Translator to Hybrid Conductor (Michael Jenkins)

Key Takeaways

- Traditional hierarchical oversight gives way to relational and network-based authority.
- AI and new structures (obelisk, amoeba, pencil models) reshape communication flows.
- The future manager orchestrates human-AI collaboration and maintains cultural connectivity.
- Collaborative intelligence becomes a strategic organisational capability.

Core Message

While middle layers may shrink numerically, their relational and connective value must expand to preserve coherence between strategy, AI and human execution.

How will the 'hollowing out' of organisation structures with a reduction in middle management change the role of senior leadership? Will they need new ways of communicating with front line employees?

My first interaction with middle managers started in the mid-80s, in Japan. I joined the Overseas Planning Department of Toyota Motor Corporation as a very junior white-collar worker helping to develop new car product information for sharing with Toyota dealerships around the world – brought in perhaps to help make car manuals from Japan more understandable to new car buyers across the world! My first real boss was an amazingly talented individual (I still think he was one of the cleverest people I have ever met) – and he was a Middle Manager. His role title was *kakaricho* – “Assistant Manager” or “Sub-section Chief” and he reported to the *kacho* (“Section Manager” or “Section Chief”). In Japanese companies at that time, such rank titles would immediately indicate to anyone inside or outside the company, your position in the hierarchy. As *kakaricho*, my boss was responsible for a small team or *kakari* consisting of about 12 people. Our unit co-existed with a myriad of other *kakari* all crammed into one huge, open-plan, neon-lit office – in all, about 100 or more people seated in long rows of desks with the bosses located perpendicular to each *kakari* row, in a classic oversight position.

The senior-most person was the *bucho* or “Department Head”. My lowly position meant I would hardly ever interact with the *bucho*: my immediate boss, the *kakaricho*, was the principal conduit of information from the top. Our *kacho* would occasionally gather us for pep talks but for the most part, I had very little to do with him. Along with my team

members, I relied on the *kakaricho* to shape my work and assign me tasks. In those days we wrote everything – proposals, reports, faxes - painstakingly, by hand. I recall my boss coaching me to prepare *Gutai An* or “Concrete Proposals”: these were planning documents on which everything substantive that you wanted to say, had to fit into one single sheet of A3 (diagrams, text, tables). This succinct and lean approach predated the much-vaunted Amazon approach to proposal writing (the “Amazon 6-pager memo” – consisting of 6 sheets of A4 and no PowerPoint presentations) – by about 20 years!

In retrospect, I have come to realise just how critical my boss – and other *kakarichos* – were to the successful running of the business. It was in their part of the organisation and through individual mastery of *ningen kankei* (human relationships, human connections) that the miraculous feat of translating strategy (from the top) into “real” work (at the bottom), happened. Without their input – the input of these unsung heroes - it is hard to imagine how anything could ever have got done. And that thought has been reinforced by my interactions over the years with hard-working, dedicated middle managers the world over – from Asia Pacific through Europe to North America. If their numbers are set to reduce – from now on, into the years to come – how will strategy get translated into actual work execution? How will senior leaders communicate with front-line workers, the “doers” – in the absence of the established lines of communication of yesteryear – to actually “get things done”?

With the advance of AI, the writing is on the wall in terms of the way jobs are changing. Some are being modified, with task elements being replaced by AI: other previously unknown, new jobs are being created. Some jobs are disappearing completely. This means that concurrent with the hollowing out of the middle manager class, as AI begins to impact junior-level roles, we can also expect to see an overall reduction in the number of junior people too. Consulting firms are talking about the emergence of “obelisk”-shaped organisational structures¹⁹ as the pyramids of old turn to dust. It may be that in other organisations we see the creation of what I call “stubby-pencil”-shaped structures that maintain a vertical shape - with AI as the core (“the lead”) of the pencil and with slimmed-down human headcount wrapped around that core.

Other structures to be expected (because they have already been evolving for some time) are more like a collection of amoebas: they operate quasi-independently, sometimes working all on their own, sometimes merging temporarily with other work units, sometimes separating out again after a project has ended. Some, like Haier in China, maintain independent but closely connected relationships, buying and selling skills and expertise within an identifiable ecosystem. Whichever polarities in structure proliferate in the years to come, whether obelisk, pencil or amoeba, the way in which senior leaders communicate with their worker populations is going to evolve.

One way to think about this is to consider the concept of *Collaborative Intelligence* – the practise of understanding how working people connect and interact. AI can help us to “see” channels of communication and even to discern “bottlenecks” where information flows slow down (for a variety of reasons and very often, for quintessentially human reasons - like simply not getting on with people you are (at least on paper) supposed to connect to and work with). Collaborative Intelligence can be broken down into three main

constituent parts: knowledge (held by humans and increasingly, by AI); intellectual discourse (between humans and increasingly, between humans and AI) and collaborative technologies (examples would include email; Zoom; Microsoft Teams).

What this means is that while the absolute number of what we have known as middle managers may hollow out and decrease in real terms, their value to organisations as a channel for strategy into execution will remain. The difference is that they will learn to marshal the power of AI in the way they had to learn how to marshal the combined skills of groups of humans in the past. In fact, for the foreseeable future, their role will be to meld and merge human and AI attributes into the combined power of what *will* be the teams of the future.

They will also continue to enable *human* connections to be made between senior leaders and their co-workers elsewhere in the organisational structure, with AI providing real-time information about activities across the enterprise such that the need for *some* human to human conversation about “what’s going on?” will not be so necessary, because what the senior leadership needs to know will be right there in front of them, courtesy of AI.

My hope is that the middle manager of the future will be able to enjoy the kind of support afforded by AI in ways that would have been unimaginable to my kakaricho boss of 40 years ago.

My lasting memories of that kind, humble man are of smiling at him at the end of the day, saying *o-saki ni shitsurei shimasu* (“Please excuse me for leaving before you”), knowing that he would be staying on in the office for several hours more. He would smile, wave, light another cigarette, and dive back into his work.

6. Developing Future Fit Middle Managers (Graham Wilson)

Key Takeaways

- The development focus must shift from knowledge transfer to experiential, relational and reflective learning.
- Middle managers need resilience, systems thinking, coaching capability and digital curiosity.
- Learning must integrate real-time challenges, peer feedback and iterative practice.
- Strong developmental architecture aligns mindset, skill set and operating structures.

Core Message

Developing middle managers requires immersive, relational, experience-based development that builds confidence, coherence and adaptability and not just skills.

There's a saying from my military days that's always stuck with me:

"The success of any mission depends on the quality of the middle ranks."

You can have the best Generals in the world, but if your middle layer can't interpret, adapt, and lead on the ground, you lose.

Business is no different.

In organisations everywhere, middle managers are the ones translating strategy into reality. They're the glue between senior leadership vision and the teams making it happen. They hold the culture, the communication, and often, the chaos.

Yet ironically, they're also the most neglected group when it comes to development.

We pour investment into the C-suite and early-career talent, and somewhere in between, the middle often gets forgotten.

It's time to change that.

Because the future of leadership will be won or lost in the middle.

6.1. The New Demands on the New Middle

Middle managers today face a perfect storm. They're navigating hybrid teams, complex stakeholder demands, fast-changing markets, and constant uncertainty. They're asked to deliver results, support wellbeing, drive change, and keep everyone connected, often with less clarity, less time, and with more pressure.

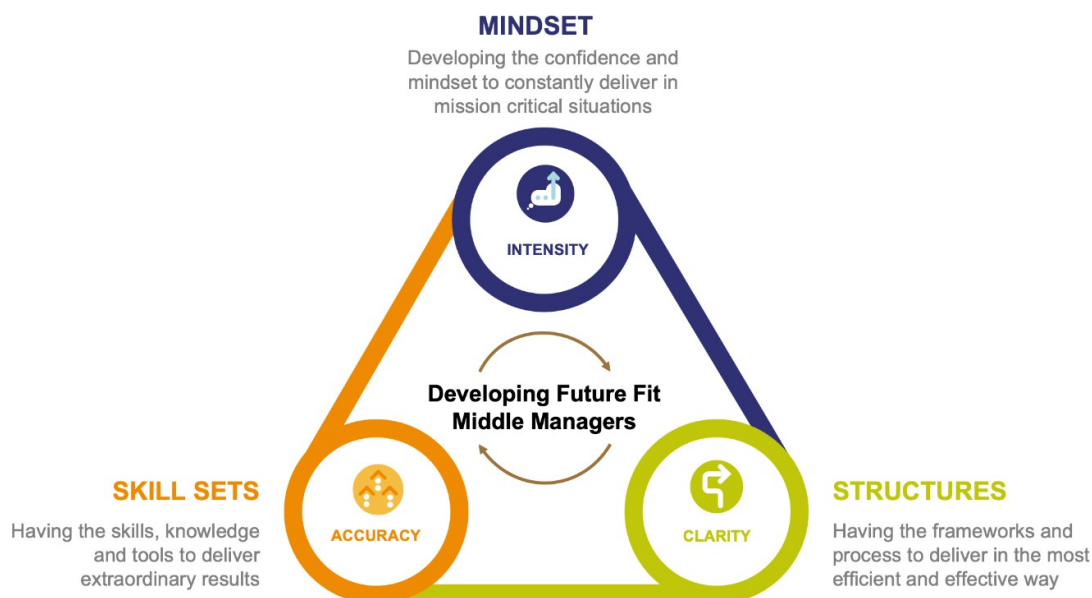
Many are struggling. It's not that they don't care. Often, they haven't been *developed* for our new world.

The old model of management training on process, performance, and compliance just doesn't cut it anymore. Tomorrow's middle managers need something different.

They need to think like managers AND leaders, not operators. They need to lead conversations, not just meetings. They need to build resilience, coach others, and navigate ambiguity with confidence.

So, what do they need to learn, and more importantly, *how* should we help them learn it?

We need to develop middle managers in 3 key areas: Mindset, Skill Set and Structure as outlined in the diagram below.



Develop Leadership AND Management AND Coaching Mindsets

The best middle managers aren't just doers; they're doers AND thinkers.

The need the mindset, structures, and skills to awaken possibility in people to deliver extraordinary results.

They need to see the bigger picture, connect the dots, and bring purpose to performance.

That kind of leadership isn't taught through PowerPoint, it's developed through *experience*. Experiential and immersive learning is the way forward.

We need to create immersive leadership programmes that throw managers into live business challenges. Let them test decisions, fail fast, and reflect deeply. Pair them with senior mentors and reverse mentors to expand perspective. Build leadership muscles through *real stretch*, not classroom comfort

6.2. Teach the Art of Conversation

The real work of leadership happens in conversation, in those five-minute corridor chats, tough feedback sessions, or moments of encouragement.

Middle managers need the confidence and skill to communicate with authenticity, curiosity, and courage.

To do this we need to run conversation labs where they practise real scenarios. Use coaching circles and peer reflection groups to refine tone, presence, voicing, and empathy. Encourage them to listen, not just speak. Because culture isn't what's written on the wall, it's how we talk to each other every day.

6.3. Build Emotional and Mental Resilience

Leading from the middle can be lonely. You're managing up, down, and sideways; often under fire from all directions.

Resilience isn't about toughness. It's about agility, the ability to reset, reframe, and refocus when things get tough. It's important to weave resilience training and mindset coaching into leadership journeys. Create spaces for recovery, reflection, and perspective-taking. Teach practical tools for managing energy, making decisions, composure, dislocated expectations, persistence and not just time.

Because when middle managers can stay centred under pressure, they become anchors for their teams.

6.4. Expand Systems Thinking

It's easy to get lost in your own department. But future-fit leaders understand how their decisions ripple through the whole organisation.

They can zoom out, see patterns, and connect people and purpose. By involving middle managers in cross-functional projects, enterprise-level strategy sessions, and shadow boards you enable them to see the bigger picture and how everything fits together.

That's how you grow leaders who think beyond the silo.

6.5. Nurture a Coaching Mindset

Middle managers are the most powerful talent developers in any organisation. The problem? Most have never been trained to coach.

A coaching mindset turns managers into multipliers by unlocking capability rather than controlling it.

Invest in coaching training, yes, but make it real. Blend on-the-job coaching practice, peer feedback, and reflective learning. Encourage them to lead with questions, not answers.

Because the best leaders don't create followers. They create more leaders.

6.6. Develop Change Leadership Confidence

Change isn't an initiative anymore; it's the normal environment. Middle managers need to lead through uncertainty with calm confidence.

Use action learning and real-time change challenges where managers lead live transformations with coaching support. Give them the mindset and tools to make sense of ambiguity, bring their teams along, and adapt fast.

When they learn to lead change, they stop fearing it.

6.7. Grow Digital and AI Confidence

Finally, technology is reshaping everything, from communication to decision-making. Middle managers don't need to be tech wizards, but they must be *digitally curious* and confident enough to use AI and data wisely.

Run digital fluency sprints and reverse mentoring programmes where younger digital natives share insights with experienced leaders. It's a beautiful exchange: wisdom meets innovation.

6.8. Make Development Human Again

The truth is, the most powerful leadership growth doesn't happen in a classroom, it happens in conversation, reflection, and real-world experience.

That's why the future of development needs to be:

Immersive: based on real challenges.

Experiential: learning through doing.

Relational: supported by coaching and mentoring.

Continuous: not an event, but a journey.

When you develop your middle managers this way, you don't just grow competence, you grow *confidence, curiosity, and connection*.

And that's the sweet spot of leadership. The middle matters. Always has. Always will. If we want extraordinary performance, we must start by investing in the people who quietly hold it all together, the leaders in the middle.

Because they're not just managing the work.

They're shaping the future.

7. Working Relationships (Ben Emmens)

Key Takeaways

- Connection is the new managerial competence in dispersed and hybrid environments.
- Authenticity, coaching, facilitation and feedback form the basis of strong team engagement.
- Boundary-spanning is an essential form of leadership capital.
- Digital literacy and availability shape relational credibility and trust.

Core Message

Managerial effectiveness now rests on the ability to maintain meaningful human connection across complex, digitally mediated and psychologically demanding contexts.

Open your arms!

How can middle managers maintain their connection with an extended team?

I've been thinking a lot about my arms recently... since June in fact when I decided to fix my running technique. It's 30 years since I ran seriously, and my goal was an Ironman in September! Fortunately, my business partner is a running coach, and as my running technique was completely overhauled, I had an epiphany – it turns vital arms are vital for running faster, and further and for longer.

How is this relevant to middle managers you might ask? Well, fast forward to October and I found myself reading 'The lost art of running' by Shane Benzie²⁰. The chapter on arms stopped me in my tracks. I knew that arms are key to transformation, but it was the metaphor he used that jumped out: *'We need to learn from the arms'*, he wrote, *'Often, they are allowed to take on the role of bad middle managers: they are there, kind of joining in, making all the right noises but, in reality, they are probably creating more problems than they are solving and, actually, likely to be making things worse.'* [...] *'If we use our arms dynamically, they provide propulsion. [...] So, these middle managers need to get with the programme. They must join in and take responsibility for our dynamic movement, or they will quite literally lead our legs astray.'*

These middle managers need to get with the programme! That's quite a statement! So, let's leave running (and arms) there for now, and instead shift our attention to middle managers. In our series, Future Work Forum partners have explained why middle managers are so important, and the role they play in connecting and bridging. Here, I

want to explore a very practical challenge they face: how can middle managers maintain a meaningful and constructive connection with an extended team? Especially at a time when many organisations are implementing substantial changes (including reducing workforce), while simultaneously dealing with the exponential rise in AI and automation, both of which typically result in an increase in their management span, and a more dispersed team.

7.1. Authentic, timely and accurate communication

Middle managers play a vital role when it comes to communication and engagement, acting as translators and interpreters between senior leadership and frontline staff. Matrix management, and a plethora of 24/7 communication channels, make their role more important than ever. Many of the middle managers I work with realise they must become more skilled in communication, able to listen and transmit information and messages with accuracy, authenticity and in a timely manner. In a recent initiative I was involved in at UNICEF (the Manager Support Programme rolled out to 6,500 people managers globally), strengthening these skills and incorporating recognition and appreciation as a way of building trust and increasing psychological safety was a key component of the programme, together with feedback skills. Managers that listen and have mastered the skills required to give effective feedback are the ones that are able to maintain a meaningful and constructive connection with their teams.

7.2. Coaching and facilitation skills

We expect middle managers to get the best from their teams and to consistently deliver results, but given the increasing complexity of most working contexts, this is a 'big ask'. It requires, as we can see from current research, a repertoire of management styles that go beyond traditional command/control or directive approaches. Managers that are able to demonstrate a coaching style, facilitate when needed, and act as internal brokers, typically deliver the highest engagement scores, have the best retention rates, and have the best working relationship with team members.

7.3. Digital literacy

It's vital to include middle managers' when strengthening digital literacy and fluency with new technology and platforms. A recent client engagement highlighted that the C-Suite had been taken care of, and frontline first level staff had been trained, but middle managers had somehow been overlooked, with wrong assumptions made about their capability to use new communications and information management systems. Equipping middle managers with the knowledge, understanding, skills AND equipment necessary for them to maintain connection with their teams and do their job is essential!

7.4. Boundary spanning leadership

CCL²¹ introduced us to boundary spanning leadership²² which is relevant for middle managers who have a crucial role to play in shaping culture, and getting things done. Middle managers who build bridges, connect between functions, departments and divisions, and who competently demonstrate boundary spanning behaviours are able to maintain their connection with individual team members and bring the whole team along with them.

7.5. Availability and accessibility

As a professional coach, I sometimes encounter middle managers withdrawing or shutting themselves off: perhaps they're caught between conflicting demands of leadership and their teams, or overwhelmed by impossible deadlines and to-do lists, or lacking skills or confidence to have hard conversations. It's tempting to shut the office door more often, or for longer, or spend a few extra days remote working, and of course this can be appropriate. But I suggest that given the extraordinary times we work in, it is more important than ever for middle managers to be both available and accessible to their teams.

7.6. Remember the arms!

In summary, for middle managers to maintain a strong and positive connection with their extended team, they must regularly recognise and appreciate their staff, give effective and timely feedback, coach for performance, anticipate challenges and facilitate solutions, navigate complexity with ease, leverage technology to the benefit of all, and proactively communicate in an authentic, timely and accurate manner, with a combination of courage and kindness. Some are doing this already of course, but for those who aren't, then it's time – as Shane Benzie said – to get with the programme, join in and take responsibility. The results will be impressive, just as they were when my arms propelled me to Ironman success in September.

8. Driving real value for stakeholders (Richard Savage)

Key Takeaways

- Middle managers are uniquely positioned to link employees, customers and suppliers for value creation.
- Purpose and contribution are major drivers for Gen-Z attraction and retention.
- Zero-distance philosophy places managers as enablers and customer-centric translators.
- AI value realisation requires managerial ownership and behavioural enablement.

Core Message

Middle managers convert organisational purpose into real-world stakeholder value by bridging energy, capability and customer-centric delivery.

Giving Middle Managers the skills and knowledge to add value to the organisation, motivate and inspire employees and deliver first class service to customers. and ensure that AI delivers the fullest impact is a role to be cherished, not abandoned. Senior management's role is to determine the strategic direction and to charge middle managers with delivering that.

How to deliver value

Middle managers can drive real value for their organisations by focusing on driving results for a variety of Stakeholders. They are ideally positioned by their closeness to them, which is often lost higher up the chain. They are ideally positioned to ensure that employees are trained and engaged to deliver to the needs of customers, both internal and external and build vital links to suppliers, again, internal and external. By delivering great value to these stakeholders, shareholders will be rewarded handsomely.

The 'Zero Distance' concept, as developed by Haier²³, is the concept that can help the approach of focusing on stakeholders gain credence in the organisation. This concept needs to be owned at the highest levels in the company for the philosophy to be implemented. The Zero Distance concept ensures that employees and customers are as close as possible. We see too often examples of companies where systems override the importance of the customer. Now, it is possible to say – then why have middle managers, as Haier suggests 'Minimum Hierarchy'. But the closeness of the managers to ensure employees are coached, trained and developed and thus motivated to ensure delivery of the fullest value, ensuring consistency and a seamless approach outweighs the hierarchy. In this way, Middle Managers become facilitators for the desired and best practice.

It is becoming clear that, to drive real value from AI, its installation needs to run on deep grooves within an organisation. A clear understanding of where the value will come from and the skills necessary to deliver this are key to success. Middle managers are at the front end of this. Without their ownership, the implementation will not deliver the value anticipated.

The importance of the role of the Manager in this new organisation cannot be overstated. Any new, junior employees recruited will inevitably be Gen Z. Gen Z seek purpose and impact and want to know that their work matters who have expectations that the company they work for will deliver an environment and a role where they will feel the value they are providing and that it is to the good of that person, a customer either internal or external. They expect their organization to be a force for good. How inspiring for their managers to be able to impart the training, coaching that will allow these employees to know they are adding real value. The energy and motivation that comes from this is immense. (to use a common analogy, too often lower-level employees see themselves as bricklayers, not builders of cathedrals). The ability to serve customers well delivers huge motivation and commitment.

Additionally, managers can ensure that better relations and results are delivered to the organisation and to its suppliers, an often-overlooked area where focus has been lacking. Ideally, these relationships should not be just transactional, but with both sides having a clear understanding of the added value that closeness can deliver. Recently, we've seen supply chain issues arising from cyber-crime and the implementation of tariffs. Closeness and common understanding can help mitigate the potential impact.

To those that say 'ESG is dead, don't bother with this stakeholder stuff', that's not the case. In a recent article from Wharton²⁴, there is real evidence in the USA, that those Municipalities who focus on ESG are able to issue their bonds at much more favourable rates than those who do not. While the article does not suggest that the same is true for quoted companies on Stock markets, the inference is clear – investors deliver to those who deliver them value. It is possible, in my opinion, that for some companies, ESG was an excuse not to deliver value. The reality is, it needs to be an and - Deliver ESG and first-class results. That way shareholders and society win.

Companies that use their middle management group effectively and wisely can do this!

9. Middle Managers as Architects of Collaboration (Sabine Hoffmeister)

Key Takeaways

- Collaboration must be intentionally designed, not left to chance or goodwill.
- Leadership evolves into influence, cultural fluency and ethical presence.
- Transparency, trust and coherence become the new operating system.
- Regeneration, reflection and rhythm are part of sustainable leadership design.

Core Message

Middle managers become designers of trust-based collaborative systems that enable coherence, belonging and innovation in fluid organisational ecosystems.

The future of middle management is neither about managing nor about the middle. It's about connecting. In a world where hierarchies flatten and technology extends our reach, middle managers are emerging as the quiet architects of collaboration — the ones who hold the invisible threads that make organizations human, agile, and alive.

9.1. From Control to Connection

For decades, middle management was defined by coordination — by translating top-down strategy into operational action. But that model belongs to an era of predictability. Today, organizations move more like ecosystems than machines. The real work of leadership lies in orchestrating flow — of ideas, of energy, of trust. Middle managers now act as network orchestrators: sensing rhythm, balancing tension, and enabling connection across boundaries. They don't just align people with goals — they align people with one another. Their impact is relational, not positional. They are the conductors of collective intelligence — creating harmony between humans, teams, and technology.

9.2. Designing Collaboration

Collaboration does not happen by accident. It must be designed — emotionally, culturally, and structurally. This is where the new middle manager steps in as an architect of collaboration. They build the architecture of trust. They create the communication spaces where people can think, feel, and disagree productively. They curate rituals that make hybrid work cohesive and human. They turn shared intention into shared practice.

These are no longer “soft skills.” They are strategic structures of belonging — the scaffolding that allows organizations to remain coherent while continuously changing.

9.3. The Inner Framework: Leadership, Influence, and Fluency

The foundation for this new role can be understood through the Leadfluencer framework — not as a title, but as a way of being. It weaves together three essential dimensions:

- Leadership – the capacity to inspire meaning and direction, to hold vision in the midst of volatility.
- Influence – the ability to create reach and resonance, not through hierarchy, but through authenticity and ethical presence.
- Fluency – the art of communicating clearly and connecting across contexts, cultures, and platforms.

At the intersection of these dimensions lies the modern middle manager: grounded, visible, and adaptive. Someone who can move gracefully between strategy and empathy, analytics and intuition, structure and flow.

Their leadership is not performative; it is integrative. They lead through tone, attention, and energy — the subtle yet powerful tools that define culture from the middle out.

9.4. Ethical Influence and Human Coherence

In an age where AI accelerates information and hybrid work disperses teams, the question is no longer how to manage productivity — but how to maintain coherence. Middle managers sit at the ethical and emotional core of this coherence. They model how influence can remain human. They remind organizations that trust cannot be automated. They ensure that communication still connects, that digital presence still feels like presence. They are, in essence, the ethical connectors — shaping how collaboration feels, not just how it functions.

9.5. Collaborative Intelligence: The Outcome

When middle managers orchestrate networks and design collaboration through leadership, influence, and fluency, something remarkable emerges: collaborative intelligence. A system that learns, adapts, and creates together — where communication becomes the bloodstream of innovation, and trust becomes its currency.

These managers don’t stand in the middle; they hold the middle. They stabilize complexity without freezing it. They create movement without noise. They transform the organization into a living network — one that breathes through connection.

9.6. In Essence

The new middle manager is the architect of connection and the designer of trust. They are fluent in emotion, ethical in influence, and visionary in leadership. They turn collaboration into a craft — intentional, human, and alive. And in doing so, they give the future of work its most essential quality: coherence in motion.

I love how my earlier thoughts and today's insights weave together — the conversation between past and present never really ends. What New Forms of Leadership Are Emerging in the Middle?

The question of what leadership will look like in the future has moved — literally — to the middle. Between strategy and execution, between purpose and people, a new kind of leader is taking shape: not the controller of processes, but the orchestrator of connection. Not the boss, but the architect of collaboration. From Hierarchy to Human Systems Thirty years ago, we believed that leadership meant moving up — through titles, through status, through layers. Today, leadership moves across: between teams, networks, and cultures.

The middle is no longer a position; it is a function of coherence. In the 1990s, when I first explored the evolving role of middle managers in “Visionen für das mittlere Management”, I wrote that they were the “network managers” of the future — responsible for trust, communication, and flow between all levels.

Back then, it was a radical thought. Now, it's simply reality. Organizations today behave like ecosystems — interdependent, adaptive, constantly reconfiguring themselves. In such systems, leadership is distributed, but connection is not accidental. It must be designed — emotionally, structurally, and ethically.

9.7. Middle Managers as Architects of Collaboration

The middle manager of the future is not the exhausted translator between conflicting demands. They are the designer of coherence. They listen across layers, sense tension before it turns into conflict, and transform disconnection into dialogue. They no longer hold power — they hold space: for reflection, feedback, and ethical influence. They align what systems think with what humans feel.

In this sense, middle managers are becoming the architects of collaboration — crafting the infrastructures of trust that allow autonomy and belonging to coexist.

9.8. Three Dimensions of Modern Middle Leadership

This transformation can be described through the Leadfluencer framework, which weaves together three timeless capacities:

- Leadership – to inspire direction and clarity in complexity.

- Influence – to reach across networks with credibility and ethical voice.
- Fluency – to move gracefully across contexts, languages, and generations.

Where these dimensions meet, collaboration becomes culture. Middle managers turn from coordinators into connectors — bridging meaning, not merely managing output. They make invisible dynamics visible. They lead through tone, not title.

9.9. Transparency, Trust, and the Courage to See

Already in the 1990s, I described “Transparenz schaffen” as the beginning of renewal. Back then, it was about feedback — the balance between selfperception and external perception. Today, transparency has become a moral principle: it builds the credibility needed for influence in a hybrid, uncertain world.

Transparency is not exposure; it is coherence made visible. It invites accountability without shame and dialogue without defense. It is what keeps organizations psychologically safe and ethically awake.

9.10. Change Agents and Coaches

The middle of the organization is where change actually happens — not in the PowerPoint slides of strategy meetings. Middle managers are the translators of transformation: they embody new values through everyday interaction. Their leadership lies in enabling others to act rather than directing them.

In 1995, I wrote: “Die Führungskraft als Change-Agent befähigt Mitarbeiter, aktiv mitzugestalten.” Three decades later, the sentence stands like a prophecy. Leadership is no longer about knowledge, but about creating learning systems — environments that nurture courage, creativity, and renewal.

9.11. The Network Mindset

The future belongs to network managers — those who navigate complexity without collapsing under it. The 1995 acronym still captures the essence of this mindset:

N – Neuerungen, Innovationen

E – Experten-Kompetenz verknüpfen

T – Teamfähigkeit fördern

Z – Ziel- und Kundenorientierung

W – Wissen sichern

E – Eigeninitiative stärken

R – Ressourcen optimieren

K – Konkurrenzvorteile übertreffen

This was, and remains, the blueprint for agile, self-steering organizations. Back then, it was called network management. Today, we call it collaboration design. The task, however, is the same: to make systems human again.

9.12. Regeneration, Reflection, and Rhythm

Leadership without pause burns out its own wisdom. Already in 1995, I proposed Sabbaticals — not as luxury, but as necessity. Periods of renewal allow perspective, creativity, and empathy to return. The same applies today.

Regenerative leadership — leading in cycles, not in straight lines — is the antidote to the exhaustion of endless transformation. Middle managers who can restore rhythm to their teams lead not just through results, but through resonance.

9.13. From Pressure to Purpose

If 1995 was the beginning of awareness, 2025 is the age of embodiment. Everything that was once theory — transparency, collaboration, coaching, ethical leadership — is now operational reality. Middle managers are not stuck in the middle anymore; they are shaping the middle. They stand where meaning is made — between vision and execution, strategy and emotion, human and system. They are not the forgotten layer; they are the living interface of the organization. And perhaps, after all these years, we can finally say what I hoped back then: It's fun in the middle.

9.14. Essence

Middle leadership is no longer a transitional phase — it's a transformational space. It is where trust, influence, and empathy turn complexity into collaboration. And where organizations rediscover that what makes them truly future-ready is not speed — but fluency.

10. Self-managed teams (Peter Thomson)

Key Takeaways

- Traditional command models are incompatible with modern autonomy and hybrid work.
- Successful self-management depends on trust, adult-adult contracts and purpose clarity.
- COVID-19 proved autonomy works, yet some organisations have regressed.
- Managers shift into coaches, mentors and enablers rather than controllers.

Core Message

The rise of self-managed teams does not remove managers. It redefines them as trust-builders, capability multipliers and culture stewards.

What can we learn from self-managed teams about the new role for middle managers?

10.1. Why we needed middle managers

In the industrial age we had stability. Jobs didn't change much from one year to the next. We could define the work flow through Business Process Engineering and split tasks down to simple mechanical parts. We then expected the humans who made up part of this process flow to follow instructions and not use their initiative. Wisdom emanated from the top and was communicated downwards through management channels. Middle management was all about controlling resources, including human resources, to meet the plans, budgets and methods dictated from above. Individual workers were not meant to make decisions but they were there to follow orders. Managers made decisions and we needed layers of them to keep the corporate machine running.

This command and control, hierarchical model became the norm during the 20th Century and was successful as long as people accepted that there was no alternative. You joined a company at the bottom and worked your way up through layers of management. You gained more authority over other people as a result in succeeding in your previous job, not necessarily based on your ability to manage. Often the best lawyer, scientist, salesman or engineer was promoted to be the worst people manager. But once a person is climbing up the management ladder it's virtually impossible to choose to go back to the things you were good at. It involves a loss of status and compensation that most people are not prepared to endure. So the middle manager settles into a comfortable role and invents processes that justify their existence. They need to approve

expenditure, set work targets and get regular progress reports. They hold monthly team meetings so they can communicate corporate messages to their staff and enforce the latest policies.

10.2. Why they are still here

It is hardly surprising therefore that anyone suggesting an alternative model for running an enterprise gets dismissed as being idealistic, impractical and eccentric. Leaders surround themselves with people who are a product of this system and block out evidence that there are different ways to manage. They have worked their way up the ladder experiencing one model of work and they are not about to change.

This corporate blindness means that self-managing organisations such as Buurtzorg, Haier and Semco are seen as rebels running in ways that cannot be adopted elsewhere. Yet there is clear evidence that allowing individuals and teams to make their own decisions results in higher productivity, lower costs and improved quality of service. The idea that people can be trusted and treated like adults may not seem that revolutionary but if it threatens the existence of middle managers it is found to be too radical for them.

10.3. What's the alternative?

There is a growing list of organisations who are running successfully without any visible middle management. They vary in size, sector and country yet they all have one thing in common. Their leaders are not motivated by personal power, they are happy to share decision-making with their employees and trust their judgement. They recognise that the best person to decide how to get a job done is the person doing the work, with advice from others when needed. But this is the opposite to the model in most companies, where knowledge and expertise flows from top to bottom along with authority and power.

10.4. Why it's hard to change

This would explain why it's difficult for existing organisations to change and why they continue to have layers of managers supporting the hierarchical system. Unless there is a compelling crisis they are not going to change and throw away everything they have worked for over the years. Their leaders will point to Buurtzorg, for example, and despite it now having more than 14,000 employees will describe it as a 'start-up' and an experiment. They choose to ignore Haier, the Chinese white goods manufacturer that employs 80,000 people and has split into self-managing teams with full P&L responsibility. This could be ignored more easily if it wasn't for the fact that Haier acquired GE Appliances in the USA in 2016 and implemented the same system turning the company around from a failure to a success.

But how long can leaders continue to bury their heads in the sand and insist that we turn the clock back? They are happy to follow the trend in organisational design to have

flatter more flexible structures as it saves them costs. But they forget that advances in technology, changes in organisational cultures and employee expectations are developing at a rapid rate. You cannot just remove middle management from the hierarchical structure and expect it to continue to function effectively. You have to change the role of the managers who remain. You have to pass management responsibility on to the people on the front line, trusting their judgement. Then the middle layer in the organisation becomes an enabler and supporter for the people who get the work done.

10.5. What we learned from the pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic forced managers to ditch their micro-management habits and measure results instead. They found that people could be relied on to get their work done without day-to-day supervision, if they felt trusted and allowed some freedom to manage their own work pattern. The pandemic also taught managers that their role was to provide a supportive, empathetic environment and that employees responded positively to this. And if they encouraged people to support each other they generated teamwork and collaboration.

The learning from this experience was that many of the supervision tasks carried out by managers are unnecessary. Making sure that employees understand what results they need to produce is still essential, but telling them how to achieve them in detail is not needed. When people were forced to work at home they managed their own hours to fit in with family commitments. They chose to work when it best suited them, whilst still being available at the right times for meetings or other communications.

10.6. Let's not go backwards

But since then we have slipped back into some of the old ways of organising work. Instead of continuing to give people the freedom to choose how they get the job done, we are telling them how to do it in the “one best way”. We are stifling creativity in the interest of efficiency. We are championing standardisation and treating workers a part of a machine instead of individual human beings with their own opinions and feelings. Middle managers can either continue to be part of this top-down model or take up the new role of mentor or coach. We may not need quite so many any more but they will still play a critical role.

11. Developing new leaders (Michael Staunton)

Key Takeaways

- Traditional career ladders are dissolving as organisations flatten and AI reshapes work.
- Leadership development shifts toward influence, adaptability, and cross-functional learning rather than formal promotion.
- Individuals must take greater ownership of their growth, supported by organisational enablers and AI-based tools (e.g., Copilot Career Agent).
- Middle managers increasingly act as career coaches, helping employees navigate personalised development paths.

Core Message

With the decline of hierarchical ladders, leadership development becomes a shared responsibility: self-driven by employees, enabled by organisations, and augmented by AI — with middle managers serving as guides and catalysts.

How will organisations develop new leaders when there is no longer a clear career path up the hierarchy? Will personal development end up with individual employees managing their own or will the new role involve development planning? - Michael Staunton

In recent years organisations have flattened their structures, and this has been termed the “Great flattening” based on factors including embracing agility, reducing cost, and raising efficiency. The application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is likely to enhance this trend. Estimates for potential job losses through AI vary and Goldman Sachs predicted the loss of 300 million globally while the World Economic Forum predicted the creation of 170 million jobs and the elimination of 92 million suggesting a net gain of 78 million. McKinsey have predicted 2.4 million jobs reduced in the US and 12 million jobs altered. In addition, McKinsey projected 14 per cent of employees globally will change their career because of AI. Very different figures but indicating a seismic shift is ahead.

For some organisations the traditional career ladder is becoming limited or lost completely especially in white collar rather than blue collar jobs. This shift raises a critical question - how will organisations develop new leaders when there is no longer a traditional path up the hierarchy and how people will develop their careers. In the past organisations were able to create linear pathways and individuals were promoted through defined roles, where individuals gained experience and responsibility with each step. Individuals were able to navigate their futures often with support of their line managers and HR/OD/learning professionals. Today, in addition to AI many

organisations operate in matrixed, project-based, or networked environments and digital culture where leadership is less about position and more about influence, collaboration, and adaptability.

In this new landscape, personal development is a crucial issue for society, organisations and individuals. Employees are increasingly expected to take ownership of their personal growth, developing career paths that align with both their aspirations and the organisations evolving needs. This self directed approach encourages individuals to seek out stretch assignments, cross-functional projects, and learning opportunities that build leadership capability outside of formal promotion levels. While AI can potentially reduce, replace, and alter jobs it can also be part of the supporting career development. AI through tools like copilot from Microsoft can help individuals create personalised career development plans and “coach” individuals to develop skills and development and networking. It has been our position at Future Work Forum that one of the aims of AI and technology in the workplace is that they should be used to augment the individual capabilities rather than replace them.

Organisations should not step back from development planning. Instead, their role can be transforming, coaching/mentoring, and encouraging learning and curiosity. It may not be possible to create career paths, but organisations could become enablers providing frameworks, tools, and cultures that support continuous learning and emerging leaders. Development planning can become more personalised, often facilitated by HR, L&D, or Organisational Development professionals and AI applications (e.g. Copilot Career agent) who act as coaches and strategic partners. This may also become an argument in amending and retaining the role of middle managers in organisations. Middle managers may evolve their roles so that part of their new responsibilities might include career and talent coaching in organisations.

This may become more important as the role of leader in organisations evolves with a focus on building key capabilities such as emotional intelligence, systems thinking, and change agility. These skills may be developed through experiential learning, coaching and mentoring, networking, and developmental feedback. Organisations are also investing in talent marketplaces and internal talent platforms that help and support individuals in the organisation to explore roles and projects aligned with their strengths and interests.

Organisations and leadership capability are rapidly changing. Leadership in the age of social media and rapid digital transformation in society points us to more distributive democratic models of leadership rather than traditional “top-down” approaches. It is likely that individuals will need to take more responsibility to develop their own careers and at the same time organisations will facilitate that development. Middle managers may well have the capacity to become coaches and mentors and the connecting new technologies and tools may become a partnership between the individual, organisational change agents, and new technology. Tools like copilot and their “Career Coach” agents are AI powered personal assistants already capable of adding support for individuals to enhance their development.

For CEOs, Senior leaders and HR and Organisational & Learning Development professionals this could be a pivotal moment. The challenge is to design systems that support both autonomy and alignment enabling people to grow in ways that are meaningful to them and valuable to the organisation and indeed society itself.

12. How Organisations Will Reward Middle Managers in the Future (Dominic O'Kelly)

Key Takeaways

- Middle management is shifting from a fixed hierarchical role to a distributed capability centred on sense-making, connection and alignment.
- Traditional reward logic (headcount, budget size, positional authority) fails to capture the real value of this work and risks systematic undervaluation.
- Future reward systems must recognise capability, contribution and long-term impact rather than short-term output or formal control.
- New reward models will combine capability-based pay, contribution-based incentives, long-term progression and reputation-driven influence.
- AI amplifies the need for human connectors and interpreters; organisations that fail to adapt reward systems will lose critical talent.

Core Message

The work of middle management is not disappearing — it is becoming more relational, systemic and influential. Organisations that continue to reward position rather than capability will struggle to attract and retain the leaders who make complexity manageable in AI-shaped, networked environments.

For years, predictions about the decline of middle management have resurfaced every time a new technology comes along. The logic is familiar: AI is automating coordination, teams are becoming self-directed, and hierarchies are thinning. In that view, the traditional manager passing information up and instructions down looks unnecessary.

That view misses the point. The title may change. The work will not.

As organisations shift from fixed roles to fluid teams and continuous learning, the middle layer becomes more important, not less. But its value looks very different. Instead of control, it is about sense-making. Instead of task oversight, it is about human connection, interpretation and alignment. Instead of sitting in a fixed layer, it becomes a capability that moves across the system.

This raises a new question: if the work changes, how should people in these roles be paid?

12.1. The role becomes distributed

In future organisations, “middle management” won’t be a rung on a ladder. It becomes a distributed function. Some people will do this work full-time. Others will rotate into it depending on the project. Some will guide teams through complexity. Others will act as translators between strategy, technology and behaviour.

Their influence will come from capability and trust rather than position. They will be network nodes rather than layer managers.

Traditional structures don’t have a place for this. Org charts assume stable hierarchy, not moving roles. That forces a rethink of how accountability, development and reward work when the role is not anchored in job title.

12.2. Measuring value when control disappears

Traditional models relied on proxies: the size of a team, the size of a budget, the length of experience, the number of processes overseen. But none of these indicators apply when the role becomes relational and interpretive.

If these roles are judged by old standards, they will be undervalued.

New measures will need to capture contribution in areas such as:

- How well teams perform without constant direction
- How quickly insight moves across the organisation
- How effectively conflict is resolved before it escalates
- How fast new tools and methods are adopted
- How quickly people gain clarity in complex environments

This work is long-range. It does not show up in monthly dashboards. But it determines whether organisations can adapt at speed.

Reward systems will need to recognise this long-term value even when the impact is indirect.

12.3. Who develops this talent?

In hierarchical models, middle managers received development through position. They were selected, trained and supported through formal structures. In distributed models, that safety net would disappear.

If middle managers of the future are expected to be coaches, connectors and interpreters, these capabilities cannot be left to chance. Organisations will need:

- A clear development path for relational and coaching skills
- Regular practice built into day-to-day work
- Peer support networks rather than relying only on senior leaders
- Consistent expectations of what “good” looks like

Without this, the role will simply become an invisible middle: essential work carried by people with no formal recognition or reward.

12.4. The Reward challenge

This is where the real gap appears. Most reward systems today are built around:

- fixed roles
- predictable ladders
- authority and headcount
- ownership of budgets or processes

Future middle managers may have none of these. Their value will sit in culture, behaviour, learning and influence. These are harder to measure and often sit across teams rather than inside one function.

So how do you pay people whose work is vital but not easily counted?

Four models are likely to emerge.

A Capability-based pay

Base pay linked to what someone can do, not what they control.

People who excel at coaching, sense-making, integration and interpretation will be valued highly. These capabilities will become as recognisable and scarce as technical expertise. (Skill-Based Pay)

B Contribution-based incentives

Not bonuses based on team output, but on outcomes across the system. This could include:

- improved collaboration between functions
- smoother handoffs across workflows
- faster uptake of new tech
- lower friction in decision-making

This shifts reward from “Did your team hit the numbers?” to “Did the organisation work better because of you?”

C Long-term signals

Career paths resembling technical tracks: fewer large jumps, more steady progression linked to deeper capability.

This approach rewards the slow compounding value of people who carry context, build trust and strengthen organisational learning.

D Reputation-based progression

In fluid systems, influence becomes visible through feedback loops. People who improve team clarity, reduce conflict or speed up adaptation will be recognised through network reputation. Reward will track this influence rather than formal authority.

12.5. Where AI fits in

AI removes much of the administrative burden that once defined line management: reporting, tracking, scheduling, knowledge capture, summarisation. But it also increases the need for human judgment.

Teams operating with constant digital input need someone who can add context, interpret signals and translate complexity into action.

AI will strengthen these roles, not replace them. The risk comes if organisations treat AI as a substitute for human authority in situations that rely on trust. AI can prompt, flag risks and automate workflows, but it cannot mediate conflict or build confidence during uncertainty.

The most effective organisations will pair AI with human connectors rather than replace one with the other.

12.6. If organisations refuse to shift

Some companies will hold onto traditional hierarchies and positional management. In the short term, nothing will break. But as more organisations adopt fluid, networked models, gaps in talent, motivation and performance will widen.

People capable of working in distributed, high-autonomy systems will gravitate toward organisations that reward capability, not position. Those that cling to old models will lose speed, adaptability and learning capacity.

Over time, they will struggle to attract the people needed to operate in networked environments.

12.7. The next challenge: matching reward to reality

The work of middle management is not disappearing. It is being rewritten.

The organisations that succeed will redesign reward systems around the actual value these roles provide: connection, learning, clarity, alignment and influence. These are not soft skills. They are stability and speed in human systems.

If organisations want people who can coach, connect, interpret and build trust especially in environments shaped by AI they need to value that work formally.

Reward cannot stay frozen in a world of fixed roles and authority structures that no longer exist. The future will not be about paying for position. It will be about paying for capability and contribution across the network.

The organisations that get this right will move faster, adapt better and retain the people who make complexity understandable. The title may fade. The value won't.

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