

// Middle Management Survival Guide

As Middle Managers, we often find ourselves in a unique (and sometimes uncomfortable) situation where we receive “incoming fire” from all directions every day. We have to deal with impossible demands from above, limited or no support from below, tight budgets, and unreasonable customer demands. Yet, we are held directly responsible for the critical success of the organization! Sound familiar? Many in middle management positions find themselves in this situation and struggle with how to achieve their goals and objectives in the face of seemingly overwhelming obstacles. Many of us deal daily with these conflicts and concerns. We often feel that nobody truly understands what we are trying to accomplish in the face of such adversity. How often have you listened to your boss describe yet another set of demands and goals, deadlines or initiatives, and think to yourself “how in the world do they expect anyone to get all this done?” And yet, we almost always find a way. We are often in a “survival” mode and as a result not very receptive to change. Many times you and/or your peers have tried to implement changes in the workplace with little to no success. As a result, when we are in a position to suggest or recommend change, those in our audiences with the same experiences are often very skeptical about the chances for change you are proposing to really make a difference or achieve lasting success.



Ironically, quite often the most effective change agents in an organization are found in the role of middle management. Conversely, those most opposed to change are also found in the same positions. And for the same reasons! The ability to influence others and the willingness to be influenced are crucial skills for any middle manager to master in order to get things accomplished. Also key is the ability to understand the normal, natural, and highly predictable human resistance to change. For far too many people, dominance seems to be the approach of choice. It is very easy to just “tell someone what to do” and move on to another problem. Even if the person we are addressing is a subordinate, this approach is very short-term and often counter-productive.

In order to “survive and thrive”, you have to realize immediately that most people have gotten where they are today because the things they have done previously have been successful. This insight (simple as it may seem) helps you better understand how the people you will need to influence often see the change you are proposing as a “risk” and occasionally even as a direct threat to them and their “turf”. Those of us in middle management have achieved success by proving daily that we can think quickly, innovate, organize, and adapt on our feet. Middle managers figure out complex and dynamic problems and coordinate the activities of multiple people, processes, and departments in order to not only make something happen but often they achieve even more than anyone expected! Only to find out that tomorrow “they” want even more. Is there no justice in this world? Middle



management has to be one of the most underappreciated, misunderstood, and least glamorous positions in any organization. Yet, nothing happens without you!

Let's look at a model that represents how resistance works with most people. We all start in the 12 O'clock position where things are working just fine. Then it happens...you find yourself in the situation where you analyze the data and/or your business processes and "something just isn't quite right". You know there is a problem, but you don't know exactly what it is or why it is occurring. You simply realize things are not as good as they should be at this point. You now find yourself at "3 O'clock" in our model represented in **Figure 1**.

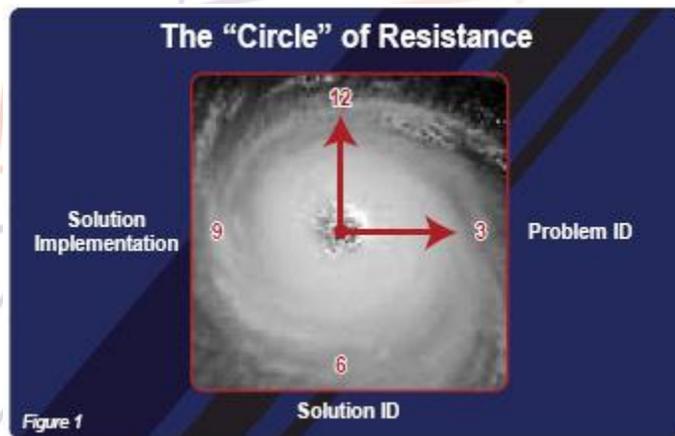


Figure 1

As you continue to work on the problem you begin to develop ideas and concepts about how to solve the issue at hand. You begin to put the pieces of the puzzle together in a way that finally begins to make sense! You even lay awake at night trying to make sure you have looked at every angle, thought of every aspect, and taken into consideration every variable to ensure that your idea or solution really is the right approach to this problem you are facing. You now do what all of us have at one time or another done...you develop your "PowerPoint Masterpiece" that will immediately convince your audience of your genius, instantly galvanize them into action, and result in your being showered with accolades from those on high for your brilliant insight and ability to save the organization from itself! You now find yourself at "6 O'clock" in that you are now identifying the problem solution.

You schedule the meeting, make your presentation and at the end ask if there are any questions. At this point you are certain that cheers, whistles, and a standing "O" is imminent. What you are met with is "polite" questions, skepticism, and occasionally, outright hostility! In your shock and surprise (because this is NOT the reaction you were anticipating) you "explain" your position again. And you are met with even stronger rejection of your plan! Let's examine what is really going on here.

You have spent the time and the effort to move yourself from "12 O'clock" (where everything is working just fine) through 3 O'clock where you know you have a problem; all the way to 6 O'clock where you know what to do about it! Your audience on the other hand, is typically somewhere between "1 O'clock" and "4 O'clock". They are not sure your



solution is the right one and some of them are not even bought into the assumption that you have identified the correct problem...much less the correct solution! You are trying to use your presentation skills and your ability to describe the situation to move them to your position. Remember how long it took you to go through the mental gymnastics to get to the point where you were ready to make the presentation? Without the benefit of having the time and information to process this at their own pace, instead of bringing them to your position at 6 O'clock, you have just driven them into the "center" of our model which is where "Resistance to Change" lives and breeds! This is graphically represented in **Figure 2**.

Instead of providing them with the insight and the knowledge to help them understand that your proposed solution is the key, they now find themselves "resisting" your ideas because they are not yet ready to concede the point that you have indeed accurately identified the problem and the solution. The more you try to "drive your point home" the more ingrained they will become in the center of the hurricane of resistance! It's as predictable as clockwork (forgive me but it had to be said ;) that they will not automatically jump on board without the time and information to process your concepts in their own time and at their own rate.

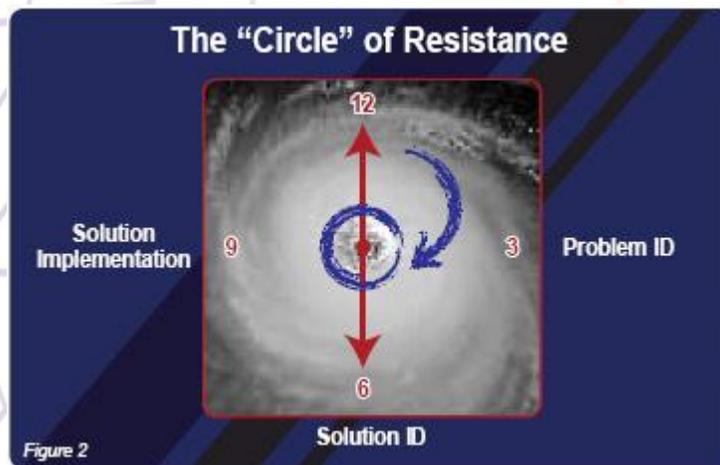


Figure 2

This same phenomenon is at work when you are at 9 O'clock, (implementing the solution), and your audience is at 3 O'clock. Anytime you find yourself significantly ahead of the group or the individual you are trying to influence, you will find that this model is at work.

In addition, it is important to understand what you may be experiencing is most likely not a "simple" lack of understanding of your solution. It is in all probability a **Level One**, **Level Two**, or **Level Three** reaction to your proposition. A professional friend and someone whom I've come to respect a great deal has developed the following concepts and definitions. They can be explored in greater detail in Rick Maurer's' book "Why Don't You Want What I Want?" Let's define what these Levels of Resistance are and how they operate.

Level One Resistance says "I Don't Understand It!"

There may be gaps in the data; they didn't fully understand the rationale for your approach; or they don't see the problem in the same terms that you do. Level One Resistance is truly an information and data processing dependent issue. By providing additional information or by explaining your position in a slightly different manner you may be able to overcome this



fairly easily. Don't underestimate the importance of giving people time to process what you have just told them and be prepared to deal with legitimate requests for more clarity.

Level Two Resistance says "I Understand it... I Just Don't LIKE It!"

This is a very different position than Level One. And yet we find that the questions you will receive are exactly the same as you will receive for Level One. And they will ask them the same way. Typically they will be polite and probing questions posed as requests for additional information. But the mental state that is driving these questions is totally different from Level One. Determining which Level of Resistance you are dealing with at this point can be very difficult. Most times when we are presenting and we receive these types of questions we plunge forth and talk away, secure in the knowledge that by providing more information we are truly gaining their support. And yet, what they are looking for is not additional information but a way to register their disapproval in an "acceptable" forum given the environment (and the organizational culture) they are in during the meeting.

You have to carefully listen to the questions you get and respond with an appropriate answer. In addition, you must develop the skill to respond with a good "probing" question in return for the party to determine which level you are dealing with at the moment. Never assume just because the question is about information that that is what they truly desire.

Level Three Resistance says "I Understand It... I Just Don't Like YOU!"

This is often the most powerful form of resistance with which you have to deal. The reason may be because you are the bearer of bad news, such as the HR Manager who has to deliver organizational or staffing announcements that are highly unpopular. It may be because they do not like the message due to the negative impact that the idea or concept you are presenting represents to them and their professional or personal security. Or it may be because of "past history" between you and the individual(s) involved. Regardless of the reason, you have to very quickly identify this form of resistance to change and develop an effective response to it or your initiative or idea stands no chance of succeeding. This can be a very destructive form of resistance. Be prepared to seek additional insight and expertise in helping you to effectively deal with this issue.

In addition to the Three Levels we just described, you will face several types of resistance to change in your journey. They are found in the following table:

Confusion:	Something in the way you presented your idea or proposal just didn't "click" with them. They truly need to discuss your ideas or your approach to gain a better understanding. This is a great example of Level One resistance.
Immediate Criticism:	No sooner than you finish your presentation you may be bombarded with instant feedback on why your concept won't work. Often times there is more going on behind the scenes with this form of resistance than just a rejection of your idea or proposal.
Denial:	Your concept is not only rejected, they even refuse to admit there is a problem! This is also a strong indication that something is going on here organizationally that is larger and deeper than the concept you are proposing.
	People smile and seem to agree with your proposal but they go out of their



Malicious Compliance:	way to ensure it doesn't work. Even if it does, they focus on all the problems it causes or the new issues they now have to handle. The entire focus of this form of resistance is to show that a different approach would have been better. This is often found in highly political environments or locations with strife and discontent in the workplace.
Sabotage:	Easily the most recognizable form of drastic resistance. But it is often the most difficult to deal with due to the difficulty of determining exactly who is responsible. One thing is for sure...they <u>don't</u> like the concept!
Easy Agreement:	At the conclusion of your presentation everyone appears excited and "bought in". You are excited because things look like they are "on track" for success! But at the first sign of trouble or the appearance of unanticipated problems, support for the new approach evaporates and you find yourself in deep trouble. Beware of groups that accept a major change too quickly or without sufficient analysis.
Deflection:	This form of resistance actually takes some skill on the part of the resistor. Every question or conversation that is intended to produce a decision or gain commitment is "deflected" with another question or discussion topic that leads the group off on a wild goose chase or onto another topic altogether. It is designed to ensure that nothing is ever agreed to and the idea, concept, or approach suffers death by neglect.
Silence:	This form of resistance can be very easy to detect but very painful for the presenter to deal with while "on stage". It is also very difficult to interpret because you have so little information to work with to determine what is going on in their minds. The best approach is to ask a series of probing questions or conduct a discussion using tools that are designed to generate conversation.
In-your-Face-Criticism:	This is often delivered by someone of respect and "position" in the organization. This will usually be someone who is recognized as being not very "politically correct" and who has a reputation for outspoken behavior. While it may be very uncomfortable, you should realize that this person just may be saying what everyone else in the room is thinking but not willing to verbalize. Deal with this in a straight forward and up-front fashion being just as honest as the person is with you. <u>DO NOT</u> engage in defensive behavior! Concentrate on how to address the issues and provide the information that addresses the concerns.

Used with permission of "Beyond Resistance" and Rick Maurer

We've discussed this next topic of concern in other papers we have published but it is critical in this arena as well. We at **X-Stream Leadership Group** firmly believe that "**True Leadership is the Use of Influence in the Absence of Authority**"©. Anyone can command action from those over whom they exercise authority or dominance. That is not leadership but simple compliance by intimidation. True leadership is the ability to engage others over whom you exert no authority and convince them that a course of action or a decision is beneficial for them because of your ability to create a win-win situation for all parties concerned. Dominance is relatively easy to obtain within an organization yet incredibly short-term in its effect and is very unsustainable. Influence (not to be confused with manipulation which is harmful to both parties) is a very powerful leadership skill that can be



learned and utilized to benefit the organization and each individual to achieve high levels of performance and results.

To successfully implement the “Art of Influence” and enjoy success in your role as a middle manager, you have to fully understand the “why” of resistance; the different styles each of the people involved; understand completely their “comfort zones”; and understand how to most effectively “frame” your position.

The best way to communicate with your team is to clearly answer the “WIIFM”...the “What’s In It For Me?” question. Until they understand how something is going to benefit them and help achieve their goals and objectives, they are simply not going to be that interested in helping you to do something that you want to do or get done. Until you can create a “Win / Win” situation for all concerned, you will struggle with gaining acceptance of your new idea or solution.

There are several failure modes we have learned to recognize (and very painfully experienced ourselves along the way) that can derail your best efforts. First and foremost of these is being guilty of insincerity. People will detect very quickly when they are being manipulated and will resent it a great deal. When you are dealing with significant change that will affect people or impact their lives, it is critical that you be as honest and upfront with them as possible. Even bad news can be dealt with as long as people believe you are working with them openly and honestly.

The second is “dragging them into your comfort style. If you are an “Expressive” personality and you are presenting to a room full of “Analyticals”, spending a lot of time on the “vision” and the long-term potentials will not be very effective. What they want (and need in order to make a decision) is data...and lots of it. Provide them with facts and figures. If you are presenting to “Amiables”, show them how your approach will benefit their current relationships with the people involved and will enhance their ability to create even more beneficial relationships going forward. The kiss of death is to present to people with other personality types what you want to see and hear. And far too often that is precisely how we construct and present our material.

Third is not listening to how something is said with as much intensity as listening to what is said. This is a crucial skill to develop in order to appreciate and understand the reactions to your new ideas and concepts. Being able to use influence first requires you to understand!

Lastly we want to look at the most important aspect of all in the world of change management...sustainment. Any change effort that doesn’t last is nothing more than “churn” in an organization. Most people have seen this outcome more often than not in their careers. It is quite common to hear them say (or think very loudly) “I can hold my breath until this goes away”. How do we avoid falling into the traps that cause most of the failures of our change initiatives? By focusing as much attention on how we sustain the change as we do on how to implement the change. It seems that all the focus and the attention is on the former and precious little is given to the latter. Plan on working as hard to create and sustain long-term commitment to the new situation as you did to get it approved. While this may sound extremely simple, it can be the biggest failure mode of all.



The roles and responsibilities for Middle Managers are very demanding and often complex. Learning how to successfully implement and utilize the concepts and techniques we've described in this article can help you in becoming more effective and increase your chances for success. While seemingly simple, learning to integrate these techniques into your normal routine can be very difficult. But for those willing to make the effort, the rewards can be substantial! What are you going to do today to give your team a better chance of becoming World-Class?

J. R. McGee

Managing Partner and CEO

1248 Queen Street, Pottstown Pa 19464

www.xstreamlean.com

610-212-6728

A Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business