

MIDDLE MANAGEMENT MOANS

Middle Management Moans

by
M & M

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Content

1	What Is This All about?	7
2	Starting at the Bottom; the Graduate	11
3	The First Management Position	21
4	The Middle Management's sandwich	35
5	The Budget and the Middle Manager	51
6	The Cost Allocation jet stream	61
7	Yearly Performance Reviews	69
8	The Supportive and Important Role of HR	83
9	How to manage the unions/ workers council	91
10	A New Strategy	97
11	The Worst and Best of Organizational Structures	109
12	Corporate Values, Corporate Citizen, and Other Hot Air	123
13	Office Strategy and Tactics for Avoiding Turbulence	137
14	How Have We Survived So Far?	149

1 What Is This All about?

Managers' positions are as incomprehensible as the English class system: Are you lower, middle (class), upper (middle class) or higher management?

One thing is for sure: You are not top management because if you were, you wouldn't be reading this. Top managers don't want to hear or read about middle managers' moans.

This book is about the managers, or those aspiring to be, sandwiched between their bosses and their own direct reports. Trying to connect the impossible demands and desires from those at higher levels with the expectations and hopes of those at the lower levels is often a desperate job that leads to heavy moaning. We will give you management survival tips and show you how to make the best of it.

To show you how to survive we use real situations from our own management lives (any of our victims may have gotten bruised but as far as we know there were no dead bodies). The survival tips, tricks, and real-life cases are presented as "cold cases" and "cold cuts"; pick from the dish as you wish and we trust these cuts will fill your hunger for management knowledge.

Our experience comes from many years of management and, of course, we believe that we are higher management, but it seems that our bosses have quite a different perception of the matter. For many years, we have been hovering at the middle-

management level, hitting the occasional air pocket, drifting lower and then finding warm air and going up again; all the time building up our experience as to how to stay up in the air. Over the years, we have shared our “moans”; blaming our bosses, cursing peers, and doubting the capabilities of our direct reports. We found ourselves the only ones in the company with any semblance of sanity; a feeling that we discovered, interestingly enough, was shared by many colleagues. We can also tell you that our companies are very different, but we are both struck by the similarities in our middle-management experiences. While doing our networking—meaning having a beer in the bar after work—many of our friends in different companies told us similar tales. But overall, we enjoy working in big companies. Big companies might have many disadvantages, but they are big enough for one to find or create a management place for oneself.

Who we are or what companies we work for is not relevant. We have both worked across the world for big, international, stock-market listed companies for more than fifty years combined and have seen all the game strategies and plays. We have used a number of them ourselves, but we discovered a lot of them too late or simply did not want to use them, otherwise, we would have become top managers ourselves!

For those readers wondering about management survival strategies and believing us to be cynical managers with our suggestions, go and read *Il Principe* by Machiavelli. He has been blamed for writing down horrible and harsh strategies to keep on top of a kingdom, but realize that Machiavelli never

invented anything; he just described what was happening and what the norm was in his time:

“I have not found among my possessions anything which I hold more dear than, or value so much as, the knowledge of the actions of great men, acquired by long experience in contemporary affairs, and in a continual study of antiquity; which, having reflected upon it with great and prolonged diligence, I now send, digested into a little volume, to your Magnificence.”

Knives, swords, and poison are out of fashion these days but there is still a lot to know and to learn. What we describe and present to you, our Magnificent Reader, in our little volume, has no other aspiration than to present a picture of the big companies' middle managers' worlds, what instruments are used to navigate hot and cold air, when to use your ejection seat, and to help you manage your own management moans. Our knowledge has been acquired through long experience and while we don't claim to have studied antiquity like Machiavelli, we had enough experience with the great men and women of large companies.

So, if you are looking for new, all-encompassing theories about what one would need to run a big multinational, stop reading right now. If you are, however, interested in learning about real-life management struggles, then just read and enjoy; there is (almost) always another day or another company, and who knows, maybe it will help you to become a Top Manager, a real Big Boss!

2 Starting at the Bottom; the Graduate

The graduate looking up

You made it, or at least you think you did: You have been hired as a Management Trainee or whatever fancy title your company gives to graduate juniors starting at the bottom of the corporate ladder.

Note the capital M and T. One of the first truths that you will learn is that capital letters can be very important. The big boss is not the ceo, but the CEO, or not the executive vice president but the Executive Vice President, and, of course, the boss is the Boss!

Interestingly enough, one is not an Employee, but an employee (or associate, co-worker, or whatever title they invented for the lower level). We have never understood why this is the case, but it's there and you better get used to it. It seems to send a message!

Maybe you outsmarted many contenders in getting the job by sheer competence or perhaps it was because your father had the right connections and persuaded the CEO of your company. Anyway, you left many of your student competitors behind; they will have to start in a mediocre job while you get the grand tour of the company for a year or more.

Watch out though, if you are in a Management Trainee program it is one of the first trappings of the corporate ladder! While you spend that year or more moving from department

to department, spending a few weeks or months between colleagues who do not particularly like you and have seen too many of these arrogant youngsters pass, your unknown competitor will be busy working in a real job and contributing to the profit of the company, showing how hard he or she works.

Unfortunately, you as Management Trainee are just cost.

You didn't realize it, but actually, in many companies, the Management Trainee thing can be deadly and you don't learn anything at all. In the departments you "visit," you are rarely put at work in a real position because you are there for too short a time. Instead, chances are that local management will give you a "project" they dreamed up the day before you got there. That project is, of course, doomed to result in mediocre achievements at best. At the end of the Management Trainee program, you will have a string of *dead dog* projects to show for and few managers thankful for your stay there. You must be really good to get through this program unharmed. So why do companies have these programs?

Human Resources (commonly referred to as HR), tells Bosses they need to have those programs to attract good people.

Bosses themselves come from such a program and naively enough believe that the program is a good thing.

Some Bosses actually really believe that you learn something by seeing all corners of the company. Unfortunately, they tend

to overlook the fact that the world and companies change constantly and that those departments where you have spent your precious time, have changed as will have the staff in those departments. Imagine you spent time in the sales department learning how to cold-call clients and chat them up. The internet has killed all this, so what did you learn, how to pick up a telephone?

There is not an iota of proof that companies do better or worse with a Management Trainee program. Did Google or Apple start out with a bunch of Management Trainees? If they had done so, they would have been dead ducks from day one! Actually, it's said that only one out of ten trainees will reach the top, and if that's true, where do the other nine Top Managers come from?

However, being in a trainee program has its benefits. Early on you are singled out as a talent and potential Higher Management. There is a good chance you'll get easy access to those Managing Directors (MD) or higher, even if only occasionally; so how do you make the most out of it, avoid the pitfalls, and grab the opportunities?

What is lurking behind you in the jungle

You would be surprised as to the fights going on over you, obviously behind your back, and no, that's rarely to get you on board.

It's about who is going to pay for you!

Budgets and targets are sacrosanct, even in times when bonuses are smaller or not available at all. If you were lucky, the company decided to average out the trainee's cost over all HR costs and charge as overhead to all departments (see Chapter 6 on internal cost allocation). If this is the case, at least the Bosses will not work hard to avoid you, but instead, will tolerate you.

Occasionally, you might meet colleagues or Bosses who show an interest in you and actually help you; sometimes you might even establish useful contacts that serve you later. How do you make a good start, you wonder? Well, here are some survival strategies:

Coffee. Go and get coffee, or the desired drink or snack of the day, for your colleagues and Boss, not only once, but as many times as you can. Beware though; avoid being seen as brown nosing. It should (appear to) be honest!

Secretary. Make sure to get on with the secretary of the Boss (we are not implying any unacceptable sexual behavior here. On the contrary, if you try that it might lead to an extremely short career...). You haven't realized yet at this stage how important secretaries are. They not only control access to the Boss, but you have to be aware that more often than not, her opinion counts! If in a conversation with her Boss, who is trying to find out how his area is really doing and how the employees value him, she slips in that actually you are not up to it / not popular with the guys and girls, you have a problem!

If she lets it be known that you are smart, intelligent, and a nice guy, your future looks bright.

Work. Try to contribute to the work of your colleagues. Nobody in the department you work in is expecting anything from you. You will be staying for a short period and then moving on. As long as you don't get in anybody's way or waste their time with endless questions they are likely to be pleased with you. But if you succeed in helping a few out with burdensome tasks, they will likely love you. Take anything on, however menial. Filing, making or checking lists; all the work they hate to do, but needs to be done.

Cold Case 1

Trainee Tom was asked to do an important task. When he showed up, it turned out to be to check thousands of names on a list against numbers; anything but challenging! This was an exercise that was pointless in the eyes of most colleagues but ordered by someone higher up in the chain. After expressing a carefully worded opinion to the secretary of the Boss on the task at hand in relation to knowledge that you expected to be acquired by a Management Trainee (at this stage in your career, Bosses do not mind junior potentials with an opinion as long as they stay polite), the task was executed fast and well. A few words from the secretary resulted in a dinner in a nice restaurant with a slightly embarrassed Boss (the higher the Boss, the less embarrassed they are over their decisions; CEO's are never embarrassed) who realized that maybe an administrative assistant should have done the job but pleased you did it without further ado. Don't forget, your colleagues were happy as well since you did the dirty work; a clear win for you!

Cold cut takeaway: Self-confidence is nice, a little and measured arrogance can't harm, but at this early stage in your career, start with working and doing the ground work!

Be careful not to present yourself as a future Manager; at this point, you are “nothing.” Talk football, soccer, tennis, economics, corporate strategy, or whatever is the topic of the day and make sure you are viewed as one of them and not as a Manager. Definitely don't discuss your holidays at the family's second home or in five-star resorts.

If you follow the above, you are likely off to a good start, but how does your Middle Manager/Boss-man view all this?

The (Middle) Manager looking down on the graduate trainee

What to do if you are a manager and a trainee is shoved into your area. You know that no matter what, it is a nuisance. What are the survival strategies available for you to choose from?

Avoid. Claim your area is up to its neck in an important project (don't worry, there are always projects going on, so use them in your favor once in a while). You cannot give the necessary care to such a young, intelligent, and promising person. No doubt he can learn much more elsewhere.

Postpone. See above, but constructively propose a time further down the road. You know that most of the time the Trainee's program planning is just talk, so the request might quietly disappear, or if it comes back, use the tactic above at that time.

Abuse. There is always another department nearby that is making your life difficult. What better use of a Trainee then to make him or her do some fact-finding on the “interface or handover” between your department and “their” department. Be sure to get the Trainee to put down well-hidden blame for all the “defects” with the other department; let the trainee present the findings to Higher Management and then praise your trainee like hell in your evaluation. It might be his or her last presentation, but it will have served your purpose of highlighting the shortcomings of the other department.

Embrace. You need to show that you are a good corporate citizen and this requires supporting higher management initiatives. Or you really believe a trainee is a good thing and the company needs to nurture them for the future. Whichever, quietly check your sources on the trainee with your colleagues; is he OK? How did he come in: smart or “parachuted” through connections? Use your knowledge to pick the right one. Receive the trainee warmly the first day, show interest and extol the virtues of the company, and have a close-out meeting with him . Play on his ego and ask his opinion of the department, etc. The Trainee will no doubt select your area as one of the most interesting in the trainee survey form presented to Top Management and mention what a great manager you are. If, however, you really want to teach him something, let him work hard and allow the trainee to make mistakes.

Cold Case 2

Manager Machiavelli was asked by a Trainee whether he'd be willing to participate in a project for another department. The topic was "to come up with improvements on a process that spanned a couple of departments and even divisions." Although the process was not very important for Machiavelli, he agreed as he had also noticed that the process was not working properly. In fact, there was a lot of frustration in some parts of his department with the workings of this process and the interfaces with other departments. Trying to solve this through joint meetings, improvement memos etc., had not structurally solved the issues. A bright and open-minded Trainee, with connections to get the funds needed to solve the structural problems, might just do the trick, he thought. The Trainee interviewed him and the people involved and went to work.

Wisely, Machiavelli, with a well-developed sense of corporate paranoia, had insisted on seeing the results before they were presented to Top Management, and when he saw the results his worst fears were confirmed: a report filled with hearsay and no fact-finding.

The inexperienced Trainee had, in good faith, written down everything interviewees had blurted out without checking if it was fact or fiction. As it goes, many statements were quite negative about "other departments" and, demonstrated insufficient or no knowledge of the whole process. Surprisingly, the only exceptions were statements concerning the sponsoring department where the Trainee was based. The helpful Manager-sponsor had in fact "checked" those statements, deleted the negative ones as

unsubstantiated and replaced them with statements that showed his own department in a favorable light.

The recommendation was to make the sponsoring department “process-owner,” with extra funding and “functional authority” over all the other departments in the process.

Machiavelli put his best man on checking the hearsay statements and could successfully counter with facts showing the report was a poor Trainee effort, leading to the withdrawal of the report. Of course, the sponsor Manager was not blamed, and the Trainee got a slap on the hand for not verifying facts and hopefully benefitted from a good lesson in corporate politics.

Cold cut takeaway: Most CEOs state that (the quality of) staff is their biggest worry, and rightly so. Trainees are seen as an important way of hiring and developing good employees and if any proof of results lacks, nobody cares. Just go along pretending that a traineeship is the right way to create fantastic managers and try to tailor the trainee’s stay to your own needs; occasionally you might be pleasantly surprised!