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Developing Middle Managers into Senior Leaders

Introduction

The British Army teaches its new officers at Sandhurst (motto: 'Serve to Lead') that "junior commanders are especially powerful role models as they are closest to our recruits and soldiers. Their characteristics are most likely to be imitated by those with whom they interact and so their leadership behaviours are of critical importance."

"The same is true of the corporate world. In his acclaimed book 'Good to Great,' Jim Collins analyzed the performance of 1,435 Fortune 500 companies between 1965 and 1995 in search of those who best made the transition from 'good to great.' His final set of eleven top performers averaged stock returns almost seven times higher than the general stock market. *Amongst their distinctive features is a tendency for senior leaders to find, develop and then trust their middle managers.*"

The above passage lays stress on the importance of the middle managers across organizations (even the military) around the world. But in the current circumstances the middle management is going through an upheaval. The ecosystem is rapidly changing and is in metamorphosis itself. As the world evolves, the governing principles of all existing systems including organizations and management are being challenged every day and are being put through numerous tests of resilience and adaptability.

The skills and mindset acquired, nurtured and applied by the middle managers in many industries seem to be either insufficient or inappropriate to deal with today's challenges. To prepare today's middle managers to be tomorrow's senior leaders is challenging, intriguing and fascinating because of the sheer amount of variables that one needs to deal with, yet being open to the idea that much of it may not get the expected returns.

The world of people development is toying and experimenting with many novel ideas, thanks to the world of internet and social media. The latest in the genre seems to be the concept of pervasive learning (3/33) model. In an era where business models become redundant every quarter, where leaders want to deliver quickly and economically, and where employees are expected to be intrapreneurs, the old ways of people development are also being examined and challenged.

One such people development process is coaching, which is in its incipient stage in different economies. The merits and demerits of this process vary widely in different situations; however in general organizations agree that in today's VUCA* world, one of the most promising ways of people development can be coaching, applied in different shapes and forms.



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*VUCA- Volatile, Uncertain, Chaotic, Ambiguous

The Evolving World of an Indian Middle Manager

We can broadly define the Indian Middle manager as someone having worked for 10-15 years, a technical/functional graduate from one of the higher education institutions in the country (especially if his organization is in the IT, ITES or manufacturing space), a post graduate in management or a combination of both. His/her professional life would have been a roller-coaster ride with a growth spurt in the initial years - a growth fueled by organizations rapidly promoting people for exceeding their targets in an economy that itself was galloping at 8%+ growth in GDP. An article in Economic Times states that the number of Infosys employees earning ten million INR or more went up from 100 to 400 and the vice presidents at Citibank rose from 80 to 300 between 2004 and 2009.

Kaushik Mitter: *"Indian middle managers are confronted with the aspiration v/s ability gap"*

Middle managers have huge importance in the organization structure of most organizations. They are the group responsible for implementing the strategy laid out by the top management, so much so that the profitability of any organization depends on middle managers successfully carrying out their responsibility. Any gap in execution can not only have financial consequences but also other manifestations such as project delays, dissatisfied customers and increased (interest) costs, all of which directly impact the balance sheet.

VJ Rao: *"Middle managers are under pressure from both the top and bottom layers"*

In the face of today's economic environment which is at best conducive for steadier growth or stagnation, middle managers also have a pressure created by society and self to maintain their growth trajectory of the recent past. Many of the middle managers of today are in a state of confusion with regard to their professional lives. Environmental factors detailed below only further aggravate that confusion.

Milind Jadhav: *"Middle managers are people who have been unable to break the glass ceiling"*

Manu Sirauthia: *"Middle management is a state of mind"*



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Some of the Factors that today's Middle Managers live in

- The world around is changing at a very fast pace (inhabitants of the VUCA world- Volatile, Uncertain, Chaotic, Ambiguous)
- A general sense of lack of personal direction coupled with the lack of confidence/capability of managing the ever changing dynamics of business and society. This is coupled with the need to outwardly appear 'in control'.
- Lack of personal and organizational support systems in helping manage when in doubt
- Changing nature of learning e.g. 3-33 model proposed by Dan Ponterfract. Equal amount of learning through formal, informal and social

Middle Managers - The Widening Gap

The industrial and IT boom over the last couple of decades ensured that there was a shortage of talent especially at the middle level. To fill the void created, companies started a major retention drive by doling out higher pay packages and better organizational designations for young talent to fill in the void. Companies also started hiring dramatically at the entry level, some sources pegging it at a million people joining the workforce every year in India. Learning however, hasn't been able to keep pace with recruitment. Therefore, someone who reached the level of middle management in very few years during the 'boom time' has had to rely only on the college education and then a very rapid learning curve, almost being forced through it at rapid pace, sometimes in spite of oneself. This has created a gap between the skills required to do more complex jobs and the education/learning provided to enable them to do the job.

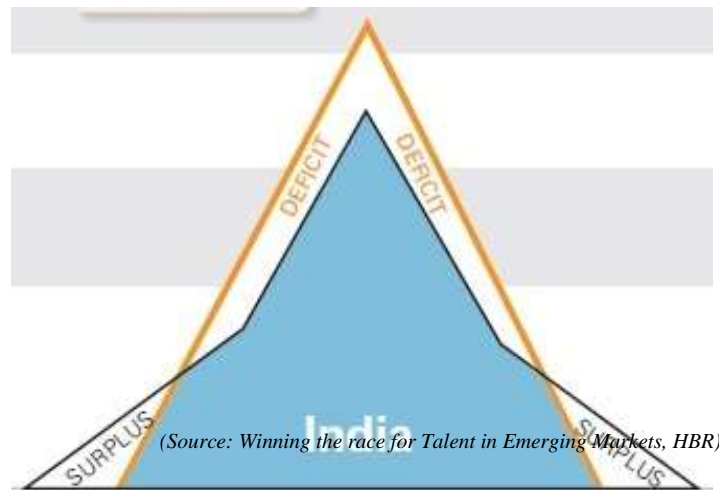
Prasad Sant: "Middle managers of today are getting redundant as they reach their level of incompetence faster"



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The demands placed on middle managers as ‘managers of managers’ are very different from the demands placed on individual contributors or first line managers. An Outlook Management Development study says “while line management is 80% management and 20% leadership, middle management is 80% leadership and 20% management.”

Tripti Singh: “MBA culture values managerial roles more than the roles involving specialized technical skills”



Think Talent conducted a research covering over 250 managers over a 3 year period across industries. The research focused on how Indian managers viewed blockages in their own careers based on a comprehensive questionnaire. The questionnaire makes enquiries in four types of blockages a person may be facing in moving ahead in their career, on three dimensions - self, in relation to others around the person and in relation to the organizational context. The four blockages are defined as:

- A lack of clear future direction or vision
- An absence of a strong connection between personal values and career direction chosen
- An absence of planning and execution competencies including skills required to marshal the resources necessary to achieve objectives and,
- A presence of inhibitions and limitations in the mind including fear of failure



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Overall, the study clearly indicates significant dissatisfaction among middle managers in relation to how their careers are shaping.

The study indicates that at the middle management level there is a gap that is widening not only in the numbers and quality but there is a drop in the quality commitment and engagement from middle managers.

Milind Mutalik: *“Organizations look at middle managers mostly as billable resources in IT companies”*

Support Systems for Middle Managers

Brian Dunn started with Best Buy in 1985 selling VCRs, but his first day was so bad that he wanted to quit. He confessed to his store manager that it had been a “lousy experience.” At that the manager invited Brian to come in on Saturday morning and to personally teach Brian how he operated on the sales floor when he was in Brian’s position. The manager **coached** Brian. In doing so, he cleared the way for Brian to not only be good at his job, but to love it. Twenty-one years later, Brian is now the President and COO of Best Buy.

Like Brian Dunn many senior leaders of today would still be able to recall at least one manager/ boss/ senior who had a determining effect on their career early on. However, on interacting with most middle managers of today, names of not many such senior managers come to the fore. It could be attributed to a change in the social structures which have become flatter as opposed to hierarchical in the past and the different kind of relationship between managers and subordinates today as compared to the past. Or did the middle managers of today grow under the wings of people who were insecure of them climbing the corporate ladder at a faster pace?

Bimal Rath : *“In the past twenty years a lot of people have grown in spite of themselves rather than because of themselves”*



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This phenomenon could also be a factor of the way people learn in today's age. More the pervasive way i.e. '3-33' way with equal amount of learning from the formal mode (classroom, rotations, conferences), informal mode (coaching, mentoring, shadowing) and social mode (webjams, wikis, friending) as opposed to the classical '70:20:10' way where in one learned 70% on the job, 20% from people (especially a tough boss) and 10% from courses, programs and reading. If we look closely at the two models then today's middle managers learn more on the go and informally, which puts a higher responsibility on the individual. This needs to be taken into account and balanced by senior leaders of today in spending appropriate but engaging time with the middle managers and set the right examples. One must also examine the sheer quality of middle and senior leaders in today's day and age where inspiring subordinates is a huge challenge, given the wider information availability, many sources of professional and personal interaction and often loads of half-baked pieces of unconnected data without coherent meaning. The leaders of today will perhaps never be able to influence people below them in as defining a way as before. The lament of many organizations (and evident in almost every employee survey) is around lack of role models and gaps in the leadership pipeline both at the top and in the middle.

Anuraag Rai: *"Middle managers need to give equal weightage to EQ and IQ"*

It is also important to note that senior leaders who now 'lead' middle managers grew up in a different era and may not have felt the same challenges and pressures which their subordinates are facing, and therefore the inability to help.

Manu Sirauthia: *"Unfortunately middle managers don't have someone to look up to"*



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3-33 Pervasive Learning model proposed in the book 'Flat Army'



Coaching Middle Managers for Enabling Growth

Organizations worldwide are increasingly looking at coaching as one of the interventions to help middle managers grow into senior leadership roles. In the Indian context it is important to establish the growth aspirations and context of middle managers. Further, the growth needs and learning styles of each individual are different. Does an organization then look at developing each individual as per his/her individual needs or should the organization look at a more holistic standardized solution?

Narayan Menon: "Most managers consider growth along either one, two or all of the three axes of knowledge, money and power"

Calvin Lyngdoh: "Most of the middle managers want to learn and make financial gains to take care of their increased financial needs linked to aspirations"



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There are several practices and therefore (linked) perceptions regarding coaching both in the minds of the middle managers, organizations and the coach community. Many organizations are looking at providing quick fix coaching solutions i.e. coaching the middle managers on a few competencies and bringing them up the performance curve, in order to make their middle managers more effective in the short to mid-term. While a quick fix coaching intervention may provide a temporary symptomatic relief and give a feeling of wellbeing to both the middle manager and the organization, it might not really have the desired developmental effect over a long period of time. Some organizations have long-term leadership development interventions with coaching as one of the main offerings. These interventions are aimed at holistic development of their middle managers by addressing a deeper set of issues that govern the displayed behaviours. These can be costly and often difficult to implement given the volatile nature of business and environment leading to frequent changes in issues and stakeholders. The data on actual beneficial (or otherwise) results from either short term or longer term coaching interventions are available only in patches. Drawing conclusions therefore may be difficult in terms of the real benefits and application issues of coaching for middle managers. Both approaches may work depending on the situation and context.

Anamika D Sharma: *“Organizations instead of looking at coaching as an external intervention, should make it a part of their culture”*

When it comes to coaching there are also a lot of questions in the minds of the middle managers, such as “Why me?” “What is the value that a coaching intervention will have?” “Will the discussions that I have with the coach be confidential?” “How much should I open up to the coach?” “Is the coach here to have a good look at me and reveal my secrets to the organization?” All these doubts get magnified especially when their survival in the organization is at stake.

Arnabi Marjit: *“How do organizations establish the need for learning in highly skilled managers who are aces in their fields?”*

Amitava Mukherjee: *“During coaching we can explore issues such as what motivates an individual to give his best”*



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Conclusion

All organizations would want their middle layer to be the fulcrum of operational excellence. In order to do so all organizations would need to focus on developing their middle managers, both to take on their current responsibilities and to take on senior positions in the future. Also, what the middle managers may have learnt at school or in their careers so far might not be enough for them to cope with the world of tomorrow.

Participants felt that the primary aim of coaching middle managers in an organization should be to address issues such as finding purpose, having clearer goals, developing action plans and clarifying motivators.

The group felt that while coaching can sometimes be of value to act as quick fix solutions, organizations need to look at it more as an investment with long term and lasting impact. Organizations will do well to focus on building a community of internal coaches and mentors – senior leaders who can bridge that critical gap and absence of role-models felt by middle managers in their path to development to higher order roles.

There was a broad agreement on the role of the coach with most of the participants confirming the view that a coach is not someone with ready solutions to the problems of the coachee. Rather, a coach should be someone who can help the coachee in discovering the solutions to his own problems by acting as a catalyst in the process of self-discovery.

Usha Sunderarajan: *“Coaching should be done with the aim of helping someone find peace with the self”*

Saurabh Sharma: *“In today’s VUCA world, people need to learn at the speed of need. Organizations need to look at coaching as a way to help the coachee understand the difference between surviving and thriving”*



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Participants Profiles

KAUSHIK MITTER

HR Director, Honeywell Automation India Ltd.

Kaushik heads HR for Honeywell Automation India Limited (HAIL) and Honeywell's Automation and Control Solutions (ACS) business in India. Prior to joining Honeywell in 2011, he was Head HR Emerging Markets for with Dr. Reddy's Laboratories Ltd, and has gained deep professional expertise working in turnkey roles in respected organizations like Tata Sons, Arthur Andersen, E&Y and Maruti Suzuki. Kaushik has a Management Degree with specialization in HR from XLRI Jamshedpur. He holds a Master's Degree in Economics from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi and a Bachelor's Degree in Economics from Sri Ram College of Commerce, University of Delhi.

CALVIN LYNGDOH

Director HR, Kimberley Clarke Lever

Calvin is a new age HR professional, heading HR at Kimberley Clarke Lever in Pune. He has worked in renowned companies such as Rediff.com and Cadburys India. In his last assignment, Calvin headed HR for the Nokia India Markets organization based in Gurgaon. Calvin is an alumnus of XLRI, Jamshedpur.

MILIND MUTALIK,

Head Global Human Resources, Synechron Technologies.

Milind is an experienced HR Professional with over 20 years of work experience across varied organizations, of which he has spent over a decade with IT/ITES sector and significant stints with Manufacturing & Services industries. Milind likes to contribute to the growth of budding talent. He believes in sharing his knowledge with students, and teaches in a lot of management colleges in Pune.

ARNABI MARJIT

General Manager HR, Lupin Limited

Arnabi has more than 17 years of implementation experience in the arena of Strategic HR across Indian, American as well as German Multinationals like Tata Motors, Kimberly Clark Lever worked with prominent organizations such as Tata Motors, Kimberley Clarke Levers and Lupin. She has managed implementation of HR processes in cross cultural environments. Her educational qualifications include an MSc (Economics) from Presidency College, Calcutta and MBA in HR from SPJIMR. Diploma in Training & Dev. from ISTD. Talent Management and Leadership Development have been a passion for her, whereby she has numerous national and international certifications in. She presently manages the entire gamut of HR for over 1350 scientists for the R&D centre of Lupin across their Pharmaceutical as well as Biotech businesses. An avid reader, a movie buff and a yoga enthusiast, had been awarded by AIMA, as the best 'Young Manager' at National Level in 1998.



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MANU SIRAUTHIA

Head Learning & Organization Development, BNY Mellon India

Manu heads Organizational Development for the Bank of New York Mellon India and is involved in strategic Talent Management and Organizational Effectiveness initiatives. He is also an active member of the Diversity & Inclusion council for BNY Mellon India and co-chairs their Women's Initiative Network. He has 15 years of work experience with over a decade in the fields of Learning and OD.

Dr. TRIPTI SINGH

Practice Head HR, Leadership Development and OD, Tata Management & Training Center

Dr. Tripti is a Practice Head: HR, OD and Leadership Development. Before joining TMTTC she was working as faculty in the area of Organizational Behavior and Human Resources at Indian Institute of Management Bangalore. Prior to IIM Bangalore she has worked as faculty at IIM Kozhikode and Goa Institute of Management. Tripti has worked for several years in industry as HRD Consultant and Personnel officer. Tripti has about 19 publications to her credit in various international and national journals and conferences. Her research areas include Leadership, Knowledge Workers, Organizational Citizenship Behaviour, Career Anchors, Spiritual Orientation at Work, Emotional Intelligence and others.

AMITAVA MUKERJI

Founder, Greentree Learning

Amitava's corporate career spans over 20 years. He has worked with Godrej GE Appliances, ICICI Bank, and the Alchemist Consulting Group. He was also the Talent Management Head with one of India's largest conglomerates – The Tata Group. He has been a coach since 2005 and has experience in working with more than a hundred coachees. He is the Founder-Director of Greentree Learning, where he focuses on capability building in organizations, covering functional and behavioural areas.

ANAMIKA

DASGUPTA

SHARMA

Founder - The Green Thumbs Coaching | Coach & Facilitator for Think Talent Services

Anamika's corporate career spans over 13 years, working in strategic HR roles with global industry leaders like Nokia, Microsoft and the Tata Group, and building subject matter expertise in the areas of talent management, managerial development, employee engagement strategy and change management. She is the Founder of The Green Thumbs Coaching, a venture working with young students and professionals helping them find & follow a career in the direction of their passion. Anamika is a post graduate in HR from Symbiosis Institute of Management Studies, Pune and holds a Master's degree in Labor Laws & Labor Welfare from Pune University.



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ANURAAG RAI

Founder-Future Pacing Consultants

Anuraag is an Executive Coach & Facilitator - Productivity Improvement: ICF Member, Hogan Assessments Graduate. He has worked in senior HR roles with various companies like Vedanta Resources Plc, Suzlon Energy Limited, Dell International Services, ACC Limited – Holcim Group and Eicher Limited. He has been awarded and recognized as Top 40 HR Professionals of Asia by Human Capital & Mercer Consulting, Singapore – 2006, Top HR Leadership Award by World HRD Congress, 2009, Most Powerful HR Professional – World HRD Congress, 2010. He has provided coaching & mentoring support to line managers & key leaders for performance enhancement & effectiveness.

MILIND JHADHAV

Co - Founder and CEO, Selectigence HR Solutions Pvt. Ltd

Milind is the Co-Founder and CEO of Pune based HR Advisory firm Selectigence HR Solutions Pvt. Ltd and the President of Boston based Mathisis Tech Inc. He earned his post graduate degree in Human Resource Management from TISS Mumbai. He has led Human Capital function in India, US, EUK, Middle East and Asia Pac region spanning across well-known firms such as Patni Computer Systems Limited, Global Logic Inc., iGATE Capital Inc., Zensar Technologies (Fujitsu ICL), Bharat Forge Limited, Emirates Airlines and Alfa-Laval Ltd. amongst others.

NARAYAN MENON

Corporate Trainer and Coach, Rewire Consultancy Services

An IIT pass out Narayan's work has mostly been technical in nature. But moving towards his true north his last stint was as General Manager - Competency Development & Technical Training with Mahindra Navistar Automotives Ltd. Narayan also works as a coach for students at IIT, Mumbai. As a corporate trainer and coach specializing in Leadership Development, he has worked for corporates like Audi India, VIP industries and Jewellex India. Prior to following his true calling as a coach and facilitator he has worked in senior level positions with vehicle majors like Mahindra & Mahindra and Eicher Motors for close to two decades.



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PRASAD SANT,

Principal, Selectigence HR Solutions Pvt. Ltd.

Prasad is a Business & Technology Leader with around 30 years experience in Industrial / Building Automation, Machine to Machine Communication (M2M) & IT - Product Engineering space. He has worked with Companies such as Tata Honeywell, Patni Computer Systems & EcoAxis. Prasad is currently associated with Selectigence HR Solutions Pvt Ltd as a Principal.

DR. USHA SUNDERAJAN,

Independent HR Consultant

Usha has a goldmine of experience spanning over four decades. She passed out from IIM Ahmedabad in 1973 and worked with organizations like HPCL and PWC. She completed her doctorate in 1984, with her doctoral thesis on 'Identification of structural, process, behavioral, climate and environmental factors that contribute to effectiveness of an organization' She has been a consultant since then. She is also a certified SHL assessor.

VJ RAO,

Independent Leadership Assessment & Development Consultant

VJ Rao is a freelance consultant in the areas of leadership assessment and development and HR. He is an Associate Coach with the Centre for Creative Leadership, and a certified CEO Coach from the Coaching Foundation of India. He represents the Totus HR School in western India. In his career spanning over 36 years, he has worked in different sectors with Companies like Crompton Greaves, Tata Group, Hindustan Lever Ltd, Cadbury India, Godrej-GE Appliances, Aviva Global Services and Suzlon Energy Ltd.

BIMAL RATH

Founder and MD, Think Talent Services Pvt. Ltd.

Bimal is the Founder and Managing Director of Think Talent Services. He consults coaches and facilitates leadership team for individual development and superior performance, and is on the advisory board of several companies across industries. He has over 23 years of experience across different industries and across geographies including the USA, Middle east/Africa and APAC. His latest corporate position was as HR Director for Nokia, supporting the massive growth for the company over the last few years. He has previously held senior positions in Eicher, British Telecom and Tata Sons. He is a certified executive coach for Center of Creative Leadership.