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The curse of the middle manager

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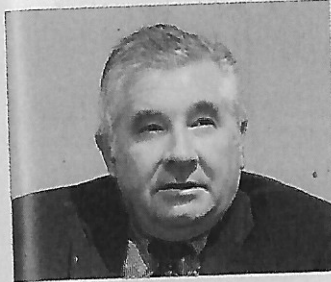
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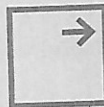
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THE CURSE OF THE MIDDLE MANAGER

PROFESSOR JIM SAKER is director of the Centre for Automotive Management at Loughborough University's Business School and an AM Awards judge. He has been involved in the automotive industry for more than 20 years



Over the past few years, I have become obsessed by college football – the American sort, not the football we play.

It is a big business, involving unpaid college students playing before crowds of up to 100,000, with millions more watching on TV around the globe. The best-paid university employee in the world is a college football coach, with a salary of \$9 million.

The coaching structure involves a head coach, supported by myriad assistant coordinators who cover every aspect of the game. Some of the best interactions are on the sideline, with the head coach berating an assistant, who, in turn, berates the students, who appear to ignore him.

One of the fascinations is the role middle management plays in the structure. A couple of years ago, Columbia Business School undertook a study that showed more middle managers suffer from depression than any other sector of the work force.

It found that middle managers have higher wages and more autonomy than the workers they manage, but earn less than their superiors and don't get to make the big decisions.

Middle managers often have to enforce policies from the top (often ones they didn't develop or agree with) on subordinates who may object to the changes. Basically, middle managers have the stressful task of absorbing

the discontent of both sides.

In the past, if you were looking for a new dealership sales manager, you appointed the best-performing salesperson, often without any consideration as to whether the person had any propensity to manage.

My experience in the industry suggests those organisations with strong middle management are the most successful, even if the talent at the top and bottom of the organisation may be lacking.

At Loughborough, we have noticed a marked rise in interest in middle management education within our sector. Historically, the bulk of manufacturer programmes have focused on product and technical training, with management education simply being a 'nice to have'. Some of the best-performing groups, as well as individual dealerships, are beginning to focus on what is often called 'talent management', ensuring that the right people with the right skillset get placed in management positions where they and the company can succeed. This is a move that supports and builds the management structure.

It is ironic that as the dieselgate scandal rumbles on, the only indictments issued have been against six managers – one of whom has been arrested in the US while the other five have been advised by the lawyers not to leave Germany. Being in the middle can be depressing.

“MORE MIDDLE MANAGERS SUFFER FROM DEPRESSION THAN ANY OTHER SECTOR OF THE WORK FORCE”