The curse of the middle manager

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THE CURSE OF THE MIDDLE MANAGER

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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 interac-
tions 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
middle managers suffer
from depression more than any other
sector of the workforce.

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
(when 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 these 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 skills 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
acquitted 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"