



LeaderBriefing

Stuck in the Middle

Why the tough job of the middle manager is getting harder every day
– and what healthcare organizations can do to change that

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When you ask senior executives about who has the toughest jobs in their organization, many will quickly admit that it's the middle managers. In most cases, they are the glue that holds the whole place together, especially during times of crises like the pandemic.

Today, healthcare is facing a new crisis: workforce chaos and instability.

While accelerated and exacerbated by the pandemic, the seeds of dramatic change in the healthcare labor market were sown long before the outbreak of COVID-19. Shortages among key clinical staff – doctors, nurses, and clinical

ancillary professionals – have been worsening for decades. Complicating these shortages are changes in the day-to-day work itself: higher patient acuity, more time-consuming electronic documentation, increasing financial pressures, and shifting employee attitudes toward work.



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In May 2023, Stamp & Chase sponsored the webinar **“Frontline Leaders: Linchpins to Improving Engagement and Reducing Turnover.”** Leading health system executives participated in our panel discussion, and we are please to share many of their important insights in this **LeaderBriefing**.

All of these changes contribute to staff burnout, making the job of the frontline leader even more challenging.

“Our frontline leaders are exhausted,” emphasizes **Jody Reyes**, senior vice president and chief operating officer of Penn State Health. “They recognize the pandemic is over. The recognize it is a new day, she conceded. “However, the world has changed. We have many headwinds that if they existed at all prior to the pandemic, they were slight breezes. Now they are tornado strength.”

In this **LeaderBriefing**, we explore the critical role of middle management in stabilizing our workforce and re-engaging frontline staff. First, we look at 10 ways we see the frontline leader’s job getting even more difficult in today’s labor environment.

1. More time providing direct patient care or functioning as a charge nurse

With staff shortages and problems recruiting for open positions, some managers believe the only solution is to jump in and take more assignments themselves. Some organizations have even mandated this practice. While staff appreciate their manager’s willingness to help, they also tell us that they aren’t as available to help solve problems and be a true leader. Unfortunately, the short-term fix often exacerbates long-term issues.

2. Too much paperwork crowds out time for “people” work

Managers understand the need to track key performance indicators (KPIs) and report on results. But some are frustrated that tracking down data takes significant time, especially when it is incomplete or difficult to understand. Providing justifications and explanations can feel as if it has become an end, rather than the means to improving results.

3. Changing attitudes of frontline staff

In today's labor market, frontline employees know that the power has shifted from management to them. In this environment, if they don't feel recognized and heard, they can resign and find another job much more easily than in the past, regardless of experience.

4. Perceived mixed messages on turnover

As turnover has skyrocketed and organizations struggle to stabilize their workforce, managers report feeling increasing pressure to keep average and low performers -- even when they know at heart that it hurts the team's work culture.

5. Struggles with holding staff accountable

Closely related to the problem of turnover is anxiety over holding staff accountable, fearing that if they do employees will disengage or resign.

6. Increased burden of managing staff who work from home

While most companies have accepted the reality that remote work is likely here to stay, they have not focused on what this shift means for frontline leaders. Leading and supporting remote workers requires a more disciplined – and in many cases more time-consuming – leadership approach to keep staff connected and engaged.

7. Diminished financial incentives to take on management responsibilities

With upward pressure on frontline staff wages, many organizations are seeing compression between managers' pay and that of the staff who report to them. For hourly workers, the opportunity to pick up more overtime and take additional shifts in other companies sometimes means they are making more than their managers, who are working just as many hours without the compensation upside.

8. Lack of appreciation cascading throughout the organization

Research is beginning to show that executives are just as burned out as employees who work below them. A leader at any level who feels underappreciated is less likely to express gratitude to those who work for them. A culture of underappreciation is especially degrading for frontline leaders.

9. Out-of-control spans of control

While there is no magic number for an ideal span of control, no management literature nor research finds that having more than 30 people reporting to a single leader is effective. However, it is standard within many healthcare organizations, especially as financial pressures increase to reduce costs.

10. No time to learn to be a great leader

The leap from star individual performer to effective leader of people is one of the biggest, most difficult transitions individuals make during their career. Simply, it takes time, a high degree of self-awareness, and development support from one's organization to learn and grow to be a strong leader. In today's environment, new leaders are thrown into the middle of a nationwide workforce crisis without the luxury of time to grow into their challenging new role.

With these growing and shifting challenges, organizations must think differently about what it means to be a leader and how to best develop and support the next generation of middle managers.

Cheristi Cognetta-Reike, chief nursing officer of the Mayo Clinic Health System, encourages senior leaders to look at leadership development through a new lens. "We all know that through the pandemic we had to quickly develop a lot of different skill sets because a lot of different work was coming into our space as

frontline leaders," she submitted.

"That did call us to sharpen skills in new and different areas.

"Now, I think our ongoing leadership education has to include an openness to saying, 'I'm going back to being a novice' in many ways." She emphasized that in today's environment, senior executives must cultivate a culture where leaders at all levels approach leadership practice as constant learners.



Strong organizational culture starts with a strong *leadership* culture

During a lively discussion at a national conference workshop session on staff burnout, a brave middle manager in the back of the room shouted out during Q&A, "What about me?! It's not just my staff. I'm more burned out as a leader than I've ever been."

Nearly every head in the room nodded in whole-hearted agreement.

Better supporting and retaining frontline staff has to start with better supporting the leaders they work for. As an essential part of building a strong, aligned organizational culture, smart companies think about their *leadership* culture. In other words, how do we take care of and develop the people who are most important to our frontline team, especially during challenging times.

Vishal Bhalla, senior vice president and enterprise chief experience officer for Advocate Health, put it this way: "The way executives can support frontline leaders is to really understand their journey. Spend time with them on the floor

and really understand their day-to-day journey. For those that need extra love, give it to them not as a directive but as elbow-to-elbow support.”

Jody agrees. “One of the things I’m doing most is increasing my time with my leaders,” she emphasized. “Our leaders need to know what is expected, not to be punitive, but to be clear in communicating expectations so they can be successful. Role modeling is the most important piece to that.”

Following are three key questions every organization should be asking themselves regarding their leadership culture.

Do middle managers have a voice?

Frontline staff usually believe that the further you move up on the leadership ladder, the more ability you have to speak up on issues that are important and concerning to you. For middle managers, we’ve seen that’s not always the case. Whether stated or implied, frontline leaders often feel they have to toe the line once they are part of “The Management” and not voice disagreement or concern.



Having a voice and some level of control over your day-to-day work is a well-recognized aspect of engagement for frontline staff. The need for that voice and control does not magically go away when you become a manager.

Of course, managers who consistently undermine important change initiatives for the organization are harming themselves and

ultimately their teams. Telling staff “I don’t agree with this, but upper management is making us do it,” actually diminishes confidence in the manager and the entire organization.

But there is a constructive way to give managers voice. In highly functioning organizations, leaders at every level see the benefit in soliciting ideas and opinions from those who report to them. They create a psychologically safe atmosphere of trust and open communication, allowing the managers they supervise to share different points of view.

When a decision is made that a manager disagrees with, their superior explains the rationale behind the decision. Then they transition the conversation to, “Let’s talk about how I can best support you in implementing this change and addressing your concerns.”

Do middle managers feel appreciated?

According to Dr. Christina Maslach, author of *The Truth About Burnout*, lack of recognition is one of the six root causes of burnout. But sometimes we hear senior leaders and physicians brag, “Hey, I don’t need that ‘atta-boy’ stuff and pats on the back,” implying that recognition and appreciation is only for the weak who lack confidence.

But everyone appreciates it when someone notices that they’ve gone above-and-beyond or made a significant impact on the experience of a patient, family member, or colleague.

Among the best, most supportive leadership teams, appreciation does not just get expressed in one direction on the organization chart. Peers and subordinates express sincere appreciation to one another just as often as their supervisors. Even CEOs appreciate it when someone notices the contributions and sacrifices they are making for the organization.

Does the organization nurture a strong middle management peer support system?

In multiple organizations we’ve worked with during and following the pandemic, many frontline managers humbly told us that they only got through the prolonged crisis because of their peers. While frontline leaders should feel as if they can confide in their supervisors, sometimes nothing is quite as reassuring as going to the office of a peer, closing the door, and saying, “I’m struggling and

could use some help and advice.”

Given the inherent stress in health care jobs, everyone needs a friendly ear sometimes to talk through a problem, share an experience that was emotionally challenging ... or just vent. Great leaders at all levels of an organization provide psychologically safe space for their colleagues.

A healthy *leadership* culture is critical to developing a strong

organizational culture that encourages staff from the frontline to the c-suite to be fully engaged and to stay long-term. Just like the staff who report to them, leaders at all levels deserve to be in a workplace environment where they feel engaged, personally fulfilled, and sincerely appreciated for the contributions and sacrifices they make every day.



Why remote work has become a major equity and inclusion challenge for leaders

No human resources strategy has gotten more attention over the past several years than *diversity, equity, and inclusion* (DEI) – and, more recently, *belonging*. In addition to being the right thing to do, smart companies know that making their workplace more welcoming and equitable to employees of all backgrounds increases the total talent pool they can attract and then retain.

In a word, DEI is about differences – valuing them, embracing them, and supporting them. And post-pandemic, one of the most significant emerging differences across workforces is *where* employees work. Whether you believe remote work is the best way to attract and retain staff long-term or a fad that will fade, the reality right now is that a geographically diverse workforce creates additional challenges for middle managers.

Creating a workplace culture that feels equitable and inclusive for everyone can be especially challenging when you have both onsite and distant workers. In healthcare, for example, most nurses don't have the option of choosing to work from home. That can create feelings of resentment toward remote employees who may be able to balance work and personal priorities more easily.



On the other hand, remote workers may feel forgotten and passed over for important projects or promotions. Also, research is emerging related to feelings of isolation and loneliness that contribute to mental health issues.

Following are three specific strategies for better supporting leaders who shoulder different responsibilities and challenges for managing geographically dispersed work teams.

Clear standards help middle managers hold employees equitably accountable

Just as there are nonnegotiable rules for in-person staff (clocking in on time, lunch breaks, etc.), managers need organizations to be crystal clear about requirements for offsite employees.

For hourly employees in call centers or other jobs where an essential part of the job to be online during set hours, holding staff accountable is usually more straightforward. Most online programs and systems offer a tracking mechanism that helps employees and their leaders measure productivity and time logged in.

In jobs where the work is not as regimented, organizations help managers hold staff equitably accountable by setting standards for responsiveness. For example, employees should be available by phone during established hours, not just by reply email. Guidelines for responding to email and voice messages are beneficial, too, both for the internal and external customers that staff serve.

Clear guidelines and expectations, which are fairly and consistently applied, help managers reduce conflict and increase individual success across a work team.

Project-based work requires different productivity standards

Employees whose work theoretically can be done in the middle of the afternoon or the middle of the night require leaders to approach productivity differently. Rather than just setting a start and completion date, mid-project milestones help leaders and team members monitor progress along the way and avoid a melt-down at the eleventh hour of a project.

Also, projects that can be completed by just one individual without the input or support of other members of the team are rare. Clear guidelines for regular project “huddles” or “stand-ups” help everyone stay on track and reduce the burden on the manager to be the only person monitoring progress. Shared project management tools and applications also can ensure individual and team accountability.

Managers need a new, expanded leadership playbook for offsite workers

“Remote” and “distant” have become the most commonly used adjectives to describe employees who are not working in the office. When those terms begin to describe employees’ relationship with the company and their manager, not just physical location, problems arise. When staff lose that critical sense of connection to the team, disengagement and unwanted turnover often follows.

Frontline leaders need a clear playbook for supporting and staying connected to a geographically dispersed workforce. They also need their organization to recognize that leading a remote or hybrid team requires extra time, tools, and effort to stay connected.

Is leadership training equipping managers with the skills they need right now?

Over the past 20 years, corporate “universities” have become increasingly popular in companies, including health systems. Designed to support leadership development, these programs develop high-quality educational content, often in collaboration with local colleges and universities. Organizations feel good about offering these types of programs, and leaders appreciate the opportunity to participate.

But given the new realities of the healthcare labor market and dramatic shifts in how the next generation of employees feel about work, are these types of programs enough to reverse trends in turnover and staff engagement?

Feeling Good vs. Getting Better

In medicine, some therapies and drugs may make a patient feel good about taking them without actually helping them get better. In a 2017 article in the peer-reviewed journal *The BMJ*, authors reported: “Most new oncology drugs authorized by the EMA (European Medicines Agency) in 2009-2013 came onto the market without clear evidence that they improved the quality or quantity of patients’ lives.”

Does the same emphasis on “inputs” vs. “outcomes” happen in leadership training?



Middle managers appreciate theoretical leadership topics that take a more **academic approach** (teaching the mind to think), but today many are asking for specific, tactical training that follows a more **behavioral approach** (teaching new skills and practices). And the skills and practices they need most are the ones that will help them reengage frontline staff, reduce turnover, and improve operating results.

A comprehensive leadership roadmap for engaging staff and improving performance

In response to frontline managers’ calls for better, more straightforward tools and strategies to engage staff, Stamp & Chase developed a comprehensive framework that empowers managers with skills and tools to consistently increase engagement, improve performance, and coach for improved results.



Using the acronym **T.E.A.M.**, which stands for **Teach, Empower, Align** and **Mentor**, this model is grounded in evidence-based leadership practices that improve workplace culture, retention, and operating results.

The scaffolding of specific management practices that lead to improved engagement are incorporated into a comprehensive curriculum and software platform called **MyTEAM**[®]. Each part of the T.E.A.M. model focuses on a different core competency of successful leadership practice.

Teach – Providing Effective Leadership to the Team as a Whole

Staff look to their manager to establish clear priorities and direction, and then provide focused support for the team to successfully achieve defined goals. As a teacher, the manager offers the expertise and wisdom that shapes the course of the workgroup. Of course, a strong teacher also is a continuous learner, benefiting from the knowledge and contributions of individuals to make the team stronger as a unit.

One of the most important skills of a strong teacher is effective, active listening.

“Do not underestimate the impact of connections,” stressed Cheristi. “A minute can feel like a really long time if you spend that minute really talking to, investing in, and listening to the person you are spending that minute with. Words matter, and how we shape the time we spend with people matters and contributes to their sense of belonging.”

There are three specific leadership practices included in the Teach portion of the **MyTEAM**[®] model, which are focused on helping leaders stay connected to the team as a whole and supporting their collective success.

Integrated Rounding

- Providing frequent visibility and support to the team as well as to patients and family members
- Focused on meaningful conversations with all key stakeholder groups to better understand strengths and opportunities for improvement
- Designed to check **in** on staff, not check **up** on staff

Daily Huddles

- Brief stand-ups lasting just 5 minutes
- Focused on key issues for that shift and helping staff be successful **today**
- Emphasis on sending staff “on the field” inspired, not discouraged

Inclusive Staff Meetings

- Most effective forum for meaningful dialogue among the team
- Striving for a **50/50** ratio of giving vs. receiving information brings energy and sense of connection to team meetings
- Ideal setting to increase employee voice

Empower – Getting Staff More Involved in Decision-Making

Central to all contemporary performance improvement methodologies – including LEAN and Six Sigma – is the idea that better solutions emerge when you involve the people who are closest to the work. While larger, complex projects often involve cross-functional groups drawn from departments throughout an organization, managers have the opportunity to launch smaller, more focused, intradepartmental projects that involve team members in decision-making within the workgroup.

Additionally, leaders should embrace empowerment as a core aspect of day-to-day interactions with the team. Simply, posing straightforward questions during rounding, huddles and staff meetings communicates that a leader values input and the team's help in problem-solving:

- What do you think?
- What can we do better?
- What are your ideas for improving teamwork and the care environment?

Align – Establishing Workgroup Goals to Drive Performance

Most organizations have mastered the art of setting well-defined, specific, measurable goals at the corporate level. But to influence behaviors and the performance of workgroups and individuals, more specific, tactical goals should be established at the departmental/unit level. Setting, tracking, consistently reporting, and then discussing progress against these goals helps the workgroup strengthen a sense of purpose around priority initiatives to improve quality, service, efficiency and/or other aspects of care.

The **MyTEAM**[®] platform makes it easy for managers to structure, track and report workgroup *leading* goals that help achieve *lagging* organization goals related to quality, customer service, marketing, finance, people, and/or other organization-specified areas. Attractive summary reports can be printed for use during departmental meetings. Consistent tracking and reporting encourages teams to celebrate accomplishments – and course-correct when results are falling short of expectations.

Mentor – Providing Consistent Feedback to Individuals

In the Mentor component of our leadership model, the real power of the **MyTEAM**[®] framework comes together. Focused on more frequent and meaningful positive feedback (which reinforces desired behaviors) and constructive criticism (which corrects problem behaviors and/or emphasizes development opportunities), three recommended leadership practices provide a platform for continuous individual and team improvement:

Daily Coaching

- In-the-moment comments on a job well done or areas for improvement
- Balanced positive and negative feedback, striving for a 5-to-1 ratio of appreciative vs. constructive comments

Development Dialogue

- More structured conversations regarding individual performance and development, held a minimum of twice per year
- Focused on career development and personal well-being
- Tone: “You are an important member of our team. We want and need you to stay.”

Observation

- Consistent, direct observation of employees in their environment doing their jobs, offering the most powerful opportunities for Daily Coaching and/or Development Dialogues
- Focuses on the *how*, not just the *what*

Helping leaders achieve success – and then sustain results

Even the most inspiringly crafted and eloquently delivered educational content is unlikely to improve staff engagement and operating results without equal thought and effort given to how leaders will be supported in changing behaviors and implementing new management practices. How often have we heard an inspirational speaker or attended a great educational program, only to return to the office to be greeted with 100 new emails, 10 new operational “fires” and a host of personnel issues? Our best intentions for change quickly evaporate.

Change is hard, even for those who consider themselves most innovative and open to new ideas. Unless we have the structure and tools to facilitate and sustain change, it likely won’t happen.



The *Align* module in the *MyTEAM™* application offers one consolidated location to efficiently enter, track and report departmental goals in quality, customer experience or other areas.

Several years ago, Stamp & Chase was working with a major international company to develop a new approach to frontline supervisor development and training. Feedback from the leadership team following pilot classes was very positive related to content. But the most important feedback during the debrief conversation came from the question of one astute director: “I love this curriculum,” she commented. “But how will we know that supervisors are actually doing all of these things to improve staff engagement after attending these classes?”

That powerful insight was the inspirational seed for building a cloud-based software platform to help managers more easily implement and manage the evidence-based practices that lead to better staff engagement. **MyTEAM®** helps managers more consistently and effectively connect with staff and patient/customers to improve the care experience and work environment.

Summary

In our work with frontline leaders post-pandemic, the message we've heard from them is loud and clear: "Help!" Strong, smart, committed leaders admit that outdated management strategies just don't work anymore given seismic shifts in labor market structure and attitudes. Strong, smart, committed organizations hear them and are responding with new strategies that are redefining what it means to be a great leader.

Vishal summarized, "There is so much change, so rapidly, and so much is asked of our people that they are sometimes starting to be disconnected from their sense of purpose. By enabling that connection back – and then helping them connect their team back to purpose -- we are starting to hear positive feedback."

About the Author



Burl Stamp, FACHE, is the President/Founder of Stamp & Chase, Inc. With broad-based experience working alongside health care professionals from the boardroom to the bedside, Burl has helped major health systems, academic medical centers and community hospitals improve bottom line, patient experience, staff engagement and patient safety results.

Prior to launching Stamp & Chase over 18 years ago, Burl served several leading health care organizations in executive roles. As president and CEO of Phoenix Children’s Hospital, he spearheaded development and construction of the first comprehensive, freestanding health care campus in Arizona dedicated to pediatrics. He developed the first strategic planning and marketing department at St. Louis Children’s Hospital, where he started the highly successful Answer Line in 1989 to provide reliable, accessible health advice to families. He went on to lead pediatric services development for BJC Healthcare/Washington University Medical Center.

Burl is the author of *The Healing Art of Communication*, a health care professional’s guide to improving communication. He is a faculty member of the American College of Healthcare Executives and a frequent speaker on communication, leadership, organizational culture and business development strategy in health care organizations.

About Stamp & Chase

Stamp & Chase partners with leading healthcare providers across the country to improve the care experience by improving leadership and communication competencies and practices among frontline caregivers and leaders. At the heart of the firm’s work are two comprehensive sets of tools and strategies to support care teams:



CAREmunication® provides a comprehensive curriculum for frontline staff focused on building competencies and practices that improve communication with both patients and colleagues

MyTEAM offers a robust portfolio of cloud-based platform of leader tools and approaches that sustain performance improvement through more effective manager coaching, goal-setting, mentoring and accountability



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