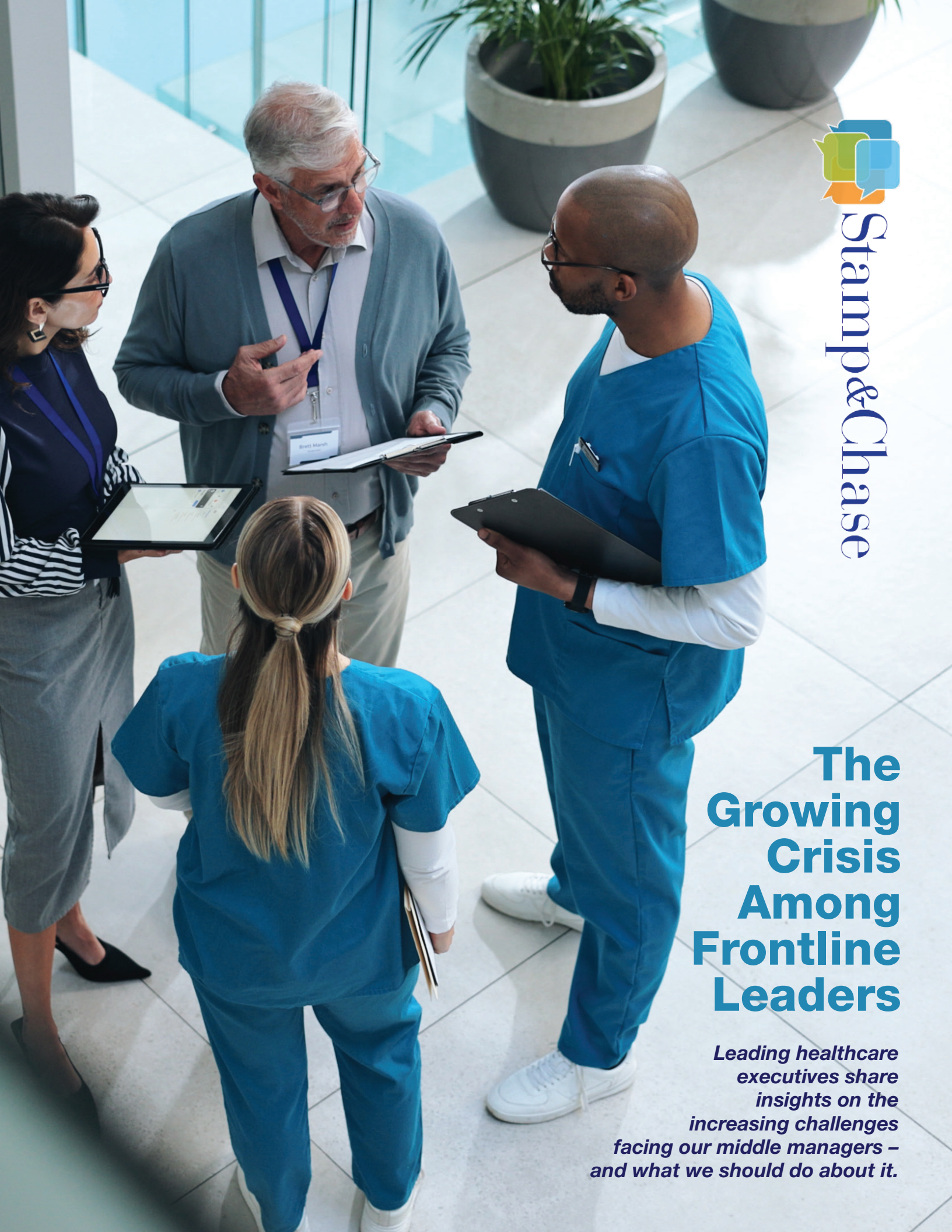




Stammp & Chase

# The Growing Crisis Among Frontline Leaders

*Leading healthcare executives share insights on the increasing challenges facing our middle managers – and what we should do about it.*



# Executive Summary

When you ask healthcare executives what worries them most, workforce issues have risen to the top of the list of things that keep them awake at night. And that's not surprising. With continuing staffing shortages, turnover, burnout, and high contract labor costs, an unstable workforce threatens operating margins as well as organizations' ability to meet growing demands for services in their communities.

While frontline staff issues garner substantial press and discussion in the industry, there is another growing but less talked about problem that impacts provider organizations' ability to solve all other workforce-related challenges: our middle managers are exhausted, frustrated, feeling less valued, and struggling to solve daunting issues that confront them every day.

Research consistently identifies frontline leaders as the linchpins of employee engagement, retention, and performance. Simply, engaged managers are key to attracting and retaining engaged employees. But today, middle managers report being overwhelmed by what feels like unrealistic expectations of their roles. This critical layer of management has always been "stuck in the middle." Now, they are coping with higher levels of burnout, stress, sadness, anger, and loneliness.

Reengaging and better supporting frontline leaders are crucial steps in stabilizing the healthcare workforce and improving employee engagement and well-being.



**Burl Stamp**  
Founder, Stamp & Chase



**Alyssa Hwang**  
Vice President, Culture Transformation,  
Stamp & Chase

## Key Takeaways

- The middle manager's role has always been a difficult balancing act between the needs of their staff and the needs senior leadership. Today, they are juggling more challenges and demands than ever before.
- To help frontline leaders prioritize their roles as change agents, organizations need to critically assess how much of their time is consumed by administrative paperwork and reporting.
- Investment in leadership development is decreasing at a time when middle managers need more mentoring and support than ever.

# Engaged Managers Lead to Engaged Employees

In their pivotal position, frontline leaders hold the keys to a thriving workplace culture. They are the critical link between upper management and frontline employees, responsible for communicating strategic organizational goals and ensuring their team's priorities and operational practices align with the organization's objectives. Highly effective middle managers are integrally involved in the organizational change processes, offering feedback and recognition, providing mentorship and development opportunities, fostering innovation, and enhancing company culture. These responsibilities make their role essential in shaping the experiences of the people they manage. If middle managers are disengaged, their teams are very likely to become disengaged as well.

- **70% of the variance in team engagement is determined by the manager<sup>1</sup>**
- **Employees with disengaged middle managers are almost 60% more likely to report feeling stressed than employees with engaged leaders<sup>2</sup>**
- **Employees with disengaged leaders report feeling “a lot of stress” 30% more frequently than unemployed individuals<sup>2</sup>**
- **When an employee has a manager they view as a role model, they score 27% higher on motivation<sup>4</sup>**



## The Growing Crisis in Middle Management

“Middle managers have the hardest job,” asserts Zane Zumbahlen, SVP of Human Resources, Fidelity Information Services (and former Chief Human Resources Officer, Cancer Treatment Centers of America). “The senior management team understands the business, the financials, and the reality of the market goals that you have to hit. Your first line managers are more employee facing. And your middle managers have to balance their staff’s needs to find the most elegant and delicate of straddles.”

This delicate balancing act has always been a challenge for middle managers. What’s tougher today is the impossible balancing act of securing adequate staffing on every shift,

keeping up with increased administrative and reporting duties, and finding time to mentor the people who report to them.

Middle managers are currently the least satisfied in their roles, with 70% stating they would return to individual contributor work if they could keep the same pay. Almost half (46%) admit they are likely to quit within the year.<sup>5,6</sup>

Leading in the trenches has never been easy, but supporting teams through the last four years has been a tipping point for many frontline leaders. Many managers were holding on, trusting that the pandemic would eventually end and many of their day-to-day problems would subside. In reality, most staffing challenges have

not improved. Many organizations continue to struggle with increasing labor expenses and decreased reimbursement from payers, especially Medicare Advantage plans. All these pressures to improve the bottom-line cascade down to the budgets of middle managers.

A large majority (75%) of HR leaders describe managers as overwhelmed and not equipped to lead change.<sup>7</sup> Middle managers themselves have questioned whether their organizations have set them up for success – a sentiment that has since been supported by research. Released at the end of 2023, a two-year study found that companies have fallen far behind historic levels of investment in leadership development and management training.<sup>8</sup>

This comes at a time when organizations are streamlining management structure to reduce

cost, adding to healthcare managers' already unrealistic spans of control.

As Paula Fessler, DNP, MS, RN, FNP-BC, Chief Nursing Officer of Barnes Jewish Hospital in St. Louis, noted, “Middle managers are living in a whirlwind that we have to get them out of. We have a less experienced workforce than we’ve probably ever had during my entire career, yet many frontline leaders spend most of their time at their desk because that’s where they think they need to be.”

This lack of engagement by middle management is having a clear, negative trickle-down effect on their teams. The first quarter of 2024 marked the lowest level of employee engagement in the United States in 11 years.<sup>9</sup>



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*Paula Fessler, DNP, MS, RN, FNP-BC,  
Chief Nursing Officer, Barnes Jewish Hospital.*

# Key Contributors to the Current Crisis

## *The role of middle management has become mission impossible*

Clinical and operations support departments are at ground-zero in the implementation of new strategies to deliver faster, leaner, higher quality care. Unfortunately, administrative tasks and bureaucracy often consume much of their leaders' time and attention, detracting from the most important aspect of their job – leading, coaching and developing their people. Despite the shift in their focus, the responsibility to improve team performance, support wellbeing, and maintain employee retention remains squarely with frontline leaders. And as their workload is growing, their budget is often diminishing.

## *Middle managers want and need better leadership development*

Middle managers are crucial to organizational cohesion, but the dual nature of their role is often pulling them in conflicting directions. They both oversee and execute work. They must build relationships with their teams while maintaining professional distance. They often are tasked with implementing decisions they did not influence and might not agree with. And they must find the delicate balance of being true to their own views and values while supporting their organization's messaging.<sup>10</sup>

Many frontline leaders are promoted to supervisory roles with little or no assessment



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**Robert Cavagnol, MD, MHA, FACS,**  
*North Region President, Froedtert-Thedacare Health System*



of their leadership competencies or professional development needs. Robert Cavagnol, MD MHA, FACS, North Region President of Froedtert-Thedacare Health System, described this as a “classic healthcare mistake.” He added, “There is an assumption that because you’re a great doctor, you will be a great leader; you’re a great nurse, so you’re going to make a great leader. We have to recognize there is a difference between individual contributors and people leaders. We should just assume that people need training.”

Zane Zumbahlen similarly noted that, “In today’s society, we’ve been doing more with less as a consistent trend. First-line managers are spending less time developing their employees, and upline managers are spending less time developing their managers. This is weakening the totality of the structure on which leadership

is built at every company I have seen.” In fact, only 48% of managers surveyed in a recent Gallup study agreed that they currently have the skills to be exceptional at their jobs. And inadequate training and development of middle management has been directly linked to high employee turnover in organizations.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Misalignment of point-of-view and priorities between upper and middle management***

Middle managers often report feeling disconnected from top leadership, especially in organizations where communication is filtered through multiple layers. When senior leadership is not accessible, it can leave middle management with an incomplete understanding of the organization’s strategy and goals, especially during uncertain and rapidly changing times. This disconnect also can cause frontline

leaders to feel undervalued, with the sense that their contributions are being overlooked. This misalignment, whether real or perceived, often stems from senior leadership's long-term strategic view versus middle management's focus on immediate operational concerns. It is compounded when senior leadership underestimates the operational complexities faced by middle managers.

As Ryan Simpson, CEO of Methodist Hospital, San Antonio, noted "It is important to acknowledge the disconnect between senior leadership and middle management in terms of focus. Senior leaders are engaged in strategic planning for the next 6 months to a year, concentrating on organizational goals and how to implement them. In contrast, middle managers are focused on pressing daily concerns, such as ensuring sufficient staffing or evaluating the preparedness of a new hire. When unexpected issues arise, middle managers must respond in real time. If their attention is too heavily directed toward long-term strategic planning, they will struggle to execute on the critical operational demands of the day."

When not acknowledged and addressed, this mismatch between senior leadership and middle management views can lead to confusion, inefficiency, stress, and low morale. Most concerning is a potential loss of trust. When senior leadership and middle management have conflicting priorities and inadequate communication, it can erode trust at both levels.

Senior leaders may believe their support is more substantial than it truly is. For example, in one study 67% of executives believed that key concerns were addressed within a week, while 51% of middle managers reported that it actually took anywhere from a month to a full year for issues to be resolved.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, nearly 75% of



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middle managers believe that understanding and explaining the “why” behind company decisions is key to their success, yet almost half feel that senior leadership fails to communicate this crucial context effectively.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Isolation and negative perception of the middle manager role***

Middle management can be a lonely role. Although they are responsible for monitoring and enforcing corporate policies, they frequently feel powerless in their ability to influence important decisions that directly impact their teams. Tasked with boosting morale, these leaders frequently face the challenge of implementing necessary yet unpopular policies, dealing with interpersonal conflict, and pushing their already strained teams to

deliver more. To deal with these challenges, frontline leaders sometimes distance themselves from their staff. Simultaneously, they tend to be siloed interdepartmentally in healthcare, resulting in a lack of peer support from colleagues who might be experiencing the same frustration and stress they are.

Organizations today often struggle to recruit or internally promote frontline staff to management roles due to the negative perception associated with the position. Once a coveted promotion, it is now often viewed as an undesirable but necessary stepping-stone to the next level of leadership -- or a role to be avoided altogether. Consequently, the fluidity in middle management creates a lack of stability within the organization.

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# The Solutions



## **Rethink the role of middle management**

Reprioritizing managers' time toward more people-centric leadership responsibilities is an important initial step in rebuilding their role as leader, mentor, and change agent. Managers are a critical link between frontline staff and senior leadership, but their time is frequently devoted to administrative tasks, enforcing rules, and reporting up the chain.

Repositioning frontline leaders requires empowering them to drive change, innovation, and culture, which in turn improves organizational adaptability, employee engagement, and alignment.

Middle managers should participate in conversations related to how strategic initiatives will be tactically implemented. Well-positioned to drive change, frontline leaders should have a seat at the table in the implementation planning process. This involvement positively influences how high-level strategies are embraced and successfully translated into daily actions impacting both patients and staff.

While 86% of middle managers view coaching staff as a key responsibility and senior leadership prioritizes retention, talent development is often neglected due to the heavy burden of other pressing demands. Organizations must help middle managers become leaders who coach, mentor and grow their teams, adjusting workflows to shift emphasis away from purely administrative tasks.

Recentering will require a clear redefining of what is expected of middle managers, including mutual agreement on prioritization. Bon Secours Mercy Health has adopted a new model for this transformation with their nurse managers. Chief Nursing Officer Veronica Scott-Fulton explained, "We streamlined our goals into two critical areas – patient experience and employee wellbeing. This has allowed middle management to concentrate their efforts without the distraction of too many competing priorities. We regularly assess progress through performance boards, integrate these goals into daily shift huddles, and have active participation by senior leadership on a quarterly basis. The results have been remarkable."

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***Veronica Scott-Fulton,***  
*DNP, MPH, MBA, BSN, BA, NEA-BC,*  
*Chief Nursing Officer,*  
*Bon Secours Mercy Health*

### ***Invest differently in frontline leaders***

Just because someone rises to middle management does not mean they inherently know how to lead; leading others requires distinct interpersonal communication and mentoring skills far different than those that drive individual success.

First and foremost, frontline leaders need specific training and development to be effective people-centric leaders. Critical competencies include facilitation, inclusion, persuasion, conflict resolution, and managing multi-disciplinary teams. Leaders in healthcare, more than in many other industries, often struggle with holding team members accountable. Managers can get stuck spending their time and energy protecting their employees' feelings in a way that inhibits them from holding people appropriately accountable and ensuring their teams deliver desired results. In this vein, middle managers need to be trained in how to set proper boundaries. Key to making this training successful and sustainable are specific tools and tactical approaches to implementing what they have learned. Continued mentorship from senior leaders also advances sustained professional development.

Developing competent, confident frontline leaders requires sustained investment in development and training for them to be successful. Dr. Cavagnol admits that organizations sometimes question these expenditures, especially during lean times.

“Some people think, ‘What if we pour all this money into training managers and then they leave our organization?’ I think the opposite; what if you don't train them and they stay? You have to invest in people and spend time developing them. When you do this, you are raising the collective bench,

and it is going to make the whole organization better.”

Investing in middle management also plays a critical role in succession planning. Well-trained frontline leaders help build a robust leadership pipeline, ensuring that the organization is ready for future transitions in leadership roles. Additionally, continuous personal development has become an expectation of younger generations, who make up a significant portion of the healthcare workforce.

Veronica Scott-Fulton described the effectiveness of a nurse leadership academy developed at Bon Secours Mercy Health: “We have made nurse leader development a priority, focusing on their individual goals and career growth. Through our leadership

academy, we help them identify their next steps and cultivate a future path. By developing leadership skills at every level, we ensure that when nurse managers are ready to advance, we have well-prepared charge nurses and supervisors ready to step into new roles, creating a seamless transition.”

Ryan Simpson aptly observed, “For middle managers, I think the expectations have to be high. But they also have to be supported, and we have to be mindful of what we put on their plates. What I’ve observed over time is that if we want a certain standard of performance, then we have to train for that. It sounds simple enough, but I’ve seen variability in the top levels in how we do on execution of that. So, high standards -- but also high support.”



## ***Increase support and appreciation from executive leadership***

Middle managers need to feel senior leaders care about and support them so that they can be more confident in their support of frontline staff. To do this, executives must be visible and connected to middle managers.

A great place to start is by boosting connections and engagement through leadership rounding. Dr. Cavagnol perfectly captured the challenge and the rewards of senior leadership visibility.

“I think face time is so important. It sends a signal that ‘you are important’ – your leadership is important, and I am going to spend time investing in you and spending time with you to help you understand things. But leadership visibility is the easiest thing to cancel. We let the tyranny of the urgent take over. You have to schedule rounding and guard it ruthlessly because there has never been a time I have rounded and thought it wasn’t a good use of my time.”

Increased and consistent visibility fosters a culture of mutual trust, where middle managers feel comfortable approaching executives with challenges. Encouraging open dialogue and inspiring frontline leaders is essential. The support and guidance we expect middle managers to provide to their teams must be modeled by senior leadership.

Ryan Simpson has maintained this culture of support through regular meetings with managers in his organization. “About every four months I’m in a 30-minute meeting with each and every leader going through their ‘people’ agenda. They have rounding requirements related to having meaningful conversations with all their people. They prepare a presentation in a template, but I make it a conversation. It’s a way of building trust, building alignment. It connects me with them, and it allows me to get to know them. It’s less about the content and more about the spirit, the heart, and the integrity behind the message and how they’re leading and





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***Ryan Simpson**, Chief Executive Officer, Methodist Hospital, Methodist Children’s Hospital, & Methodist Hospital Landmark*

how they’re engaged with their people. And I really enjoy that.”

Transparency in communication is another critical aspect in creating a culture of trust and alignment with middle managers. Explaining the background and rationale behind decisions is essential, because lack of clarity and understanding can lead to frustration and resistance. When middle managers understand the “why,” it helps them provide clear, consistent, and meaningful explanations to their staff, increasing buy-in and commitment. They also are better equipped to make informed choices and adapt their actions to support the organization’s goals. Leaning into the “why” strengthens organizational cohesion by ensuring everyone is moving in the same direction with clarity and purpose.

In healthcare, recognition is commonly directed toward those on the front line, while contributions

of management are expected and, as a result, appear underappreciated. Meaningful recognition of middle management can go a long way toward building morale and motivation when it is genuine and thoughtful. The best way to achieve this is to make praise personal, specific, immediate, and consistent.

Validating middle managements’ efforts reinforces the reality that their contributions are critical to organizational success. Dr. Cavagnol astutely observed, “I think recognition is huge. Spend time celebrating people - those who are taking on tough tasks, those who are moving things forward. At the end of the day, if you’re not getting that, if you’re not getting any other validation, the only thing you look at is your paycheck, and people are going to say there’s not enough zeros on this.”

## ***Give middle managers a stronger voice***

Middle managers want agency in their roles as much as they want rewards for their accomplishments. Dr. Cavagnol laughingly commented, “This piece is really hard to do. Organization leaders need to push decision making down as low as you possibly can. And what it means is you’ve got to let go. I see so many leaders struggle with that.”

Smart organizations encourage frontline leaders to actively participate in problem-solving discussions, asking for their input, sharing their suggestions with others, and recognizing their contributions. When middle managers feel heard, they are more open to ambitious yet obtainable goals. Allowing them to make decisions they believe are in the best interest of their teams improves buy-in and success in implementation.

Paula Fessler emphasized the long-term, transformative impact that giving frontline staff and managers voice can have in an organization – and in the way individuals think about leadership.

“When I came to St. Louis Children’s Hospital early in my career, I had the privilege of working for Velinda Block, who was chief nursing officer at the time,” she explained. “I got invited to a nursing meeting in her office, and I thought it was the best thing ever. She wanted to hear the voice of the nurses and how she could really work to support those of us who were on the front lines of care.

“Back then, I didn’t think I wanted to be a nurse leader,” she admitted. “But I saw how being present, open to feedback, and really seeking to understand can make a major difference. That influenced my leadership style and the priority I place on intentionally connecting with frontline staff.”





## ***Nurture a strong middle management peer support network***

To build a strong middle manager peer support network, organizations must be intentional in their efforts to foster collaboration and shared learning. By formalizing peer support structures, managers can connect through a cohort approach that enhances skill-building, encourages best practice sharing, and builds a broader resilience network. This kind of structured collaboration provides middle managers critical emotional and professional support by fostering a sense of camaraderie and reducing feelings of isolation. Managers benefit from having trusted colleagues to confide in, and the peer network plays a vital role in promoting their overall well-being and job satisfaction.

As Zane Zumbahlen noted, “It’s funny because you’ve got all kinds of conferences, but I don’t know that you have a middle management conference. What’s the support structure for middle managers? Is there a conference where you can build a network through which you’ve got some advocacy and support outside of your respective companies? Or how do you network across business units within your company to build bridges? Here’s the thing: if you feel connective tissue -- whether it be internally or externally to your organization with a like-minded peer group -- that is meaningful. I would do more to establish and set that up.”

Frontline leaders in healthcare carry a heavy burden, often without adequate support or recognition. Their day-to-day challenges and plot in life can be improved by reshaping their role to be more central to change management, investing in leadership development, and creating stronger connections with both senior leadership and peers. Strengthening the voice of middle management and providing them with the

appreciation they deserve can turn their current disengaged state to one that feels well-supported and a valued part of healthcare leadership.

## ***Develop the tools and talents managers need to be successful, people-centric leaders***

Increasingly, frontline leaders are asking for practical, easy-to-use strategies and tools that help them connect more successfully with their teams. In response to feedback from both middle managers and their organizations, Stamp & Chase has developed a comprehensive framework that empowers frontline leaders with skills and tools to consistently increase engagement, improve performance and coach for better results. Beyond introducing new ideas, we equip managers with practical team-based strategies they can put into action.

Using the acronym **T.E.A.M.** – which stands for Teach, Empower, Align, and Mentor – this model is grounded in evidence-based approaches that improve the workplace environment, retention, and individual success.

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.frontline staff.”

# 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.

There are three specific practices included in the Teach module of the **MyTEAM®** model:



### **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 when leaders strive for a 50/50 ratio of giving vs. receiving information and ideas

# 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 or other aspects of care.

The **MyTEAM**® platform makes it easy for managers to structure, track and report leading indicator goals related to quality, customer service, marketing, finance, people, and/or other organization-specified areas. Attractive summary reports can then 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 module, 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), 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

Recognizing the need for managers to implement leadership techniques consistently, we also created a cloud-based application featuring the T.E.A.M. model. This application is optimized for mobile use, allowing managers to easily access and utilize leadership resources on their phones. By ensuring these tools are always available, managers are empowered to lead more effectively no matter where they are.



## Summary

Middle managers have always been the linchpins of employee engagement, retention, and other aspects of operational performance. Today, their role arguably is even more pivotal to solving the vexing workforce problems facing the healthcare industry. Given staffing shortages as well as employees' changing expectations and attitudes about work, frontline leaders are facing new challenges that are unlike those they have successfully navigated in the past. To be successful in today's environment, managers desperately need – and deserve – a fresh, comprehensive approach to personal and professional development that will help them reenergize, reengage, and rediscover the joy in being a healthcare leader.

### Resources

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## About Stamp & Chase

Stamp & Chase partners with leading healthcare providers across the country to improve the care experience by improving leadership and communication competencies 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**<sup>®</sup>

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



**myTEAM**<sup>®</sup>

**myTEAM**<sup>®</sup> offers a robust leadership curriculum and associated cloud-based tools and approaches that sustain performance improvement through more effective leader coaching, goal-setting, mentoring, and accountability

# Stamp&Chase

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