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RESOURCE GUIDE

The Missing Middle:
2 Keys to Unlock Middle
Manager Potential

If you're serious about building an inclusive and high performing culture, don't just look up. Look to the middle.

www.inclusivityinsight.com

Culture takes root in the middle—where leadership meets everyday action

When we talk about culture change in organizations—especially the shift toward more inclusive and high-performing workplaces—the spotlight often lands on senior leadership. Rightly so, as the tone is set at the top. But between vision and execution lies a powerful yet often overlooked group: middle managers.

Middle managers are the connective tissue of an organization. They translate leadership's strategic vision into daily operations and, just as importantly, carry employees' realities and feedback back up to leadership. When it comes to shaping culture, they are not just messengers—they are multipliers. The behaviors they model, the priorities they emphasize, and the way they lead their teams has a direct and lasting impact on how culture is lived day-to-day. Yet despite their critical role, they are often overlooked.

Middle Managers: Culture Carriers and Change Catalysts

Middle managers translate big ideas into everyday behavior. They are the ones who lead team meetings, resolve conflicts, give feedback, hire and onboard employees, and create the environment where team members either feel valued—or excluded. When it comes to culture, middle managers are not just enforcers; they are culture creators.

According to research from the Wharton People Analytics Initiative, middle managers are uniquely positioned to drive inclusion because of their frequent, high-touch interactions with team members. But they need the right mindset, skill set, and support system to do so effectively.

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The Pressure Cooker of the Middle

It's been well documented that the middle-manager role is one of the most exhausting in the workplace. These managers face:

→   Conflicting demands from leadership and their teams
→   Limited authority but high responsibility
→   Constant context-switching between strategic thinking and operational execution
→   Emotional labor—especially when managing diverse, remote, or global teams

Despite high expectations, middle managers are often the least invested-in tier of leadership. Many organizations provide robust development programs for senior leaders and frontline staff, while middle managers are left with outdated or generic leadership training—if any at all.

Culture efforts often fail not because people don't care, but because the people who are tasked with making change happen don't have the resources or backing to do it well.

"Middle managers, are expected to play very different roles when moving from one interaction to the next, alternating between relatively high and relatively low power interaction styles. By virtue of their structural positions, they are simultaneously the "victims and the carriers of change" within an organization, receiving strategy prescriptions from their bosses above and having to implement those strategies with the people who work beneath them. As a result, middle managers often find themselves stuck in between various stakeholder groups, which can produce "relentless and conflicting demands."

Harvard Business Review

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Two Keys to Unlock Middle Manager Potential

If your organization wants to foster an inclusive, high-performing culture, you must treat middle managers as strategic partners in the process. That means giving them more than responsibility —it means providing meaningful support: practical, real-world training they can apply immediately, and a psychologically safe environment where they feel empowered to learn, lead, and speak up.

1) Training

...that's real & relevant

Too often, leadership development is overly theoretical or divorced from the realities of managing diverse teams. Middle managers don't need abstract frameworks—they need practical, actionable tools they can use in real time. They're giving feedback across differences, navigating team dynamics, managing conflict, overseeing hybrid teams, and making hiring and performance decisions that directly shape workplace culture.

2) Psychological Safety

...for the managers themselves

Organizations often talk about psychological safety as something managers should create for their teams. But what's less discussed is whether managers themselves feel safe—safe to admit they don't know something, to ask for help, or to push back on cultural dynamics that aren't working.

If you want middle managers to model vulnerability and lead with empathy, they need to experience those things in their own peer and leadership relationships.

Let's take a close look at each of these...

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1) Training
A Middle Managers Journey (that sticks!)

Traditional "one and done" training doesn't move the needle for busy middle managers. What works is a structured, sustained learning journey that's integrated into their workflow and aligned with business priorities.

To be effective, training for middle managers must be:

CONCRETE

Defining what inclusive behavior looks like, with clear, behavioral examples tied to the organization's values.

PRACTICAL

Offering evidence-based tools like structured feedback models, inclusive decision-making frameworks, and facilitation techniques for equitable discussions.

EMBEDDED

Integrating into performance and accountability systems, not treated as a standalone initiative or one-off workshop.

SOCIAL

Creating space for reflection, peer learning, and accountability among managers facing similar challenges.

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At Inclusivity, we model learning journeys for middle managers using the following approach:

Discovery & Goal-Setting
Month 1

Begin with 360 assessments, interviews, or engagement data to identify strengths and growth areas. Each manager sets a personal leadership project or goal tied to real outcomes—such as improving team belonging or feedback quality.

Core Skill Sprints
Month 1-3

Provide short, themed development sessions (e.g., effective feedback, bias mitigation, coaching conversations) and where possible, combine micro-learning, virtual workshops, and on-the-job application. Sessions are intended to be short and digestible.

Peer Learning Circles
Ongoing

Cohorts (preferably cross functional) meet every few weeks to share wins, troubleshoot challenges, and hold each other accountable. These peer spaces normalize vulnerability and accelerate the transfer of learning to practice.

Group Coaching
Month 1-6

Monthly group coaching and weekly drop-in hours with external coaches help managers translate their learnings and personalize their leadership approach.

Shadowing
Month 4-6

Managers apply their learning by leading real world culture-focused initiatives or shadowing senior leaders during key decisions. This ensures skills are practiced in high-stakes, high-impact environments and not just role-played in a workshop.

Measurement & Storytelling
Month 16+

Track shifts in behavior, team sentiment, and relevant business KPIs. We often encourage managers to craft a short "impact story" to share with their teams and with leadership—reinforcing a culture of learning, transparency, and recognition throughout this journey.

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2) Psychological Safety
A Model for Building Safety & Connection

When managers feel supported and safe, they're more likely to take the interpersonal risks required to foster trust and inclusion on their teams. In short: you can't ask middle managers to lead with courage if they're operating in fear. That means:

→ **Normalizing growth and learning** at the manager level, including admitting missteps or knowledge gaps without fear of being judged as ineffective.

→ **Creating spaces for open dialogue**, where managers can talk honestly about the challenges of leading inclusively without being shamed or sidelined.

→ **Backing culture-building efforts with leadership support**, so that managers know their inclusion work won't be seen as "soft" or peripheral, but as central to their role.

	What it looks like	The Impact
Group Coaching Pods	6–8 managers meet with a coach monthly to unpack tough conversations, role-play, and set commitments.	Builds trust, creates space for vulnerability, and accelerates behavioral change.
Communities of Practice (COPs)	Voluntary forums—virtual or in-person—where managers discuss specific topics (e.g., leading hybrid teams) and share resources and learnings.	Sustains learning, surfaces patterns across teams, and feeds insights back to HR/leadership.
Cross Team Shadowing	Managers observe a peer's team meeting, then debrief on inclusive moments and opportunities.	Provides fresh perspectives and quick peer feedback loops.
Asynchronous Peer Learning	Slack or Teams channels where managers post questions ("How would you handle…?") and share successes in real time.	Scales learning across time zones and keeps momentum between formal sessions.

Another Idea: Kick-start every peer session with a "Real Talk" round—each person shares one recent win and one challenge. Over time, this ritual conditions candor and creates a psychologically safe rhythm.

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Culture Runs Through the Middle

Culture doesn't live in mission statements. It lives in moments: team check-ins, hiring decisions, performance reviews, conflict resolution and more. These are the moments middle managers own. If we want inclusion to be more than an aspiration, we need to invest in the people who bring it to life every day.

Middle managers are not a barrier to culture change—they're the key to it. But only if we stop overlooking them and start empowering them.

That empowerment must be intentional. It means designing leadership development that reflects the complex realities of managing today's teams. It means creating psychologically safe spaces where managers can learn, grow, and connect. And it means treating inclusion not as an initiative, but as a leadership standard—one that's practiced, measured, and modeled from the middle out.

Organizations that invest in their middle managers don't just build stronger teams— they build cultures where people thrive. And that's not just good for inclusion. It's good for performance, retention, innovation, and long-term success.

So if you're serious about culture change, don't just look up. Look to the middle.

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Build the culture you envision by empowering those who shape it daily.

At Inclusivity, we help organizations turn intention into action—building cultures of trust, care, and courage even in complex times. Whether you're just getting started or ready to deepen your inclusion efforts, we're here to support your journey with training, facilitation, and strategic guidance.

Explore our services for change.

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