

Stuck in the middle with you...



Creating a systemic context for mid-tier leadership in a volatile world requires extraordinary determination – the kind that turns ordinary people into leaders.

BY SIAN LUMSDEN AND IAN MITCHELL

Leaders, says David Kolzow in his book *Leading from Within*, are just ordinary people with extraordinary determination. Makes you think, doesn't it? Meanwhile, the UK's National Health Service recently proposed a new model for leadership in the public sector. Leadership, it says, can be seen as a process which involves finding temporary resolutions between opposing principles, meeting the need to mobilise human motivation, while also regulating it and making it dependable and predictable. Some task!

Barry Oshry, in his intriguing book *Seeing Systems*, has this to add to the conversation: "Tops are burdened by what feels like unmanageable complexity; bottoms are oppressed by what they see as distant and uncaring tops; middles are torn and confused between the conflicting demands of priorities coming at them from tops and bottoms." Rarely has a truer word been spoken.

Torn and confused

These days, many organisational systems – both public and private – have evolved a service delivery model that entrusts end-user welfare to relatively junior individuals. Furthermore, they utilise a significant number of assistant managers and team leaders to provide hands-on service supervision and on-the-job leadership to their teams. Meanwhile the 'tops', as Oshry calls them, focus on big strategic thinking, data analysis and making sure that the organisation continues to survive in what is increasingly described as the VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) working environment of today.

But how do the 'middles' feel about all this? Oshry has identified some workplace responses which some might find to be uncomfortable reading. "Middles," he says, can be "alienated from one another, non-cooperative and competitive... isolated from one another when they should be working together to coordinate systems processes." Of course, if we encounter these patterns in our emerging and mid-tier leaders, those

of us who are 'tops' tend to personalise it and come up with personalised solutions. And then, we are surprised when the next layer of 'middles' demonstrate the same tendencies, feel the same isolations and are equally torn and confused as their predecessors were.

consider whether perceived person-to-person conflicts could be understood differently in the light of broader systemic issues; and by considering that, in these VUCA days, everyone from the 'tops' right down might frequently struggle to survive. So perhaps my director didn't simply

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Spatial blindness

In our work, we increasingly discover that many mid-tier leaders suffer from a form of what Oshry calls "spatial blindness" or, to put it another way, a lack of understanding as to the purpose, goals, priorities, values and relational networks in operation within their broader organisation. They essentially seek to successfully lead teams in a task-focused manner but with no real idea of where that team and task sit in the broader context of the ecosystem in which it is embedded. Or, even worse, they may have an erroneous concept of what is happening elsewhere in the organisation and are therefore unable to provide clear evidence-based responses to combat that tide of low morale in their teams when members feel unfairly oppressed by what they see as distant and uncaring 'tops'.

A way out

So how do we change the pattern? What can we do to break the repeating cycle of over-stressed 'middles' making less-than-perfect decisions, antagonising their team members, blowing the budget or having to take significant sick leave because of the stress they encounter? Where do we find the exit?

In our coaching of mid-tier leaders and their teams, we find that it usually begins with an exploration of context: by asking participants to

'ignore my email'. Perhaps her inbox is so overwhelming that it got pushed far down the pile and she took longer to get to it than she would have wanted to. Or maybe she misinterpreted it as being just one more in a long list of criticisms coming her way and failed to see it as the helpful suggestion it was intended to be.

Understanding context

Context – to understand it fully, we need to rise above spatial blindness. This, says Oshry, creates a challenge to "let go of our own story; to let go of our evaluation of the other; to stay in the process (and) be strategic rather than reactive". It creates a challenge not to personalise things when "stuff happens" that feels unfair or takes a different slant from the one we might have chosen.

Understanding context enables mid-tier leaders to suspend judgement; to go with the not knowing rather than to react in haste; to take others' worlds into account; and to remain focused on doing the job at hand. And that, of course, is what their organisation needs them to do. But it isn't easy, it takes determination – the kind of extraordinary determination that turns ordinary people into leaders.



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