



Becoming a great 'manager of managers'

How to successfully navigate
the squeezed middle

Using the latest evidence and best
practice to equip middle managers to be
the best they can be, ready for tomorrow

Research shows becoming a great manager of managers (or middle manager) is a tough challenge, but it's also the position where you can have the greatest impact – for you and the teams you lead. It's an important leadership transition, arguably one of the trickiest.

Becoming a great manager of managers is not simply doing the same things for several teams instead of one – this is the road to stress, failure and overwhelm. It requires different ways of thinking, a shift in priorities, and new ways of connecting to the role, the teams you lead, and the wider organisation.

“ Middle managers are the heart of your company. Without the ability of middle managers to connect and integrate people and tasks, an organisation can cease to function effectively. ”

(McKinsey, 2023)

The Hemsley Insights Group (a team of external L&D practitioners, clients, and internal learning experts) is dedicated to developing and sharing illuminating insights. We believe everyone has the ability to be a great manager and leader, but it takes care and attention to navigate the role and grow the capacity, capability, and confidence needed to succeed.

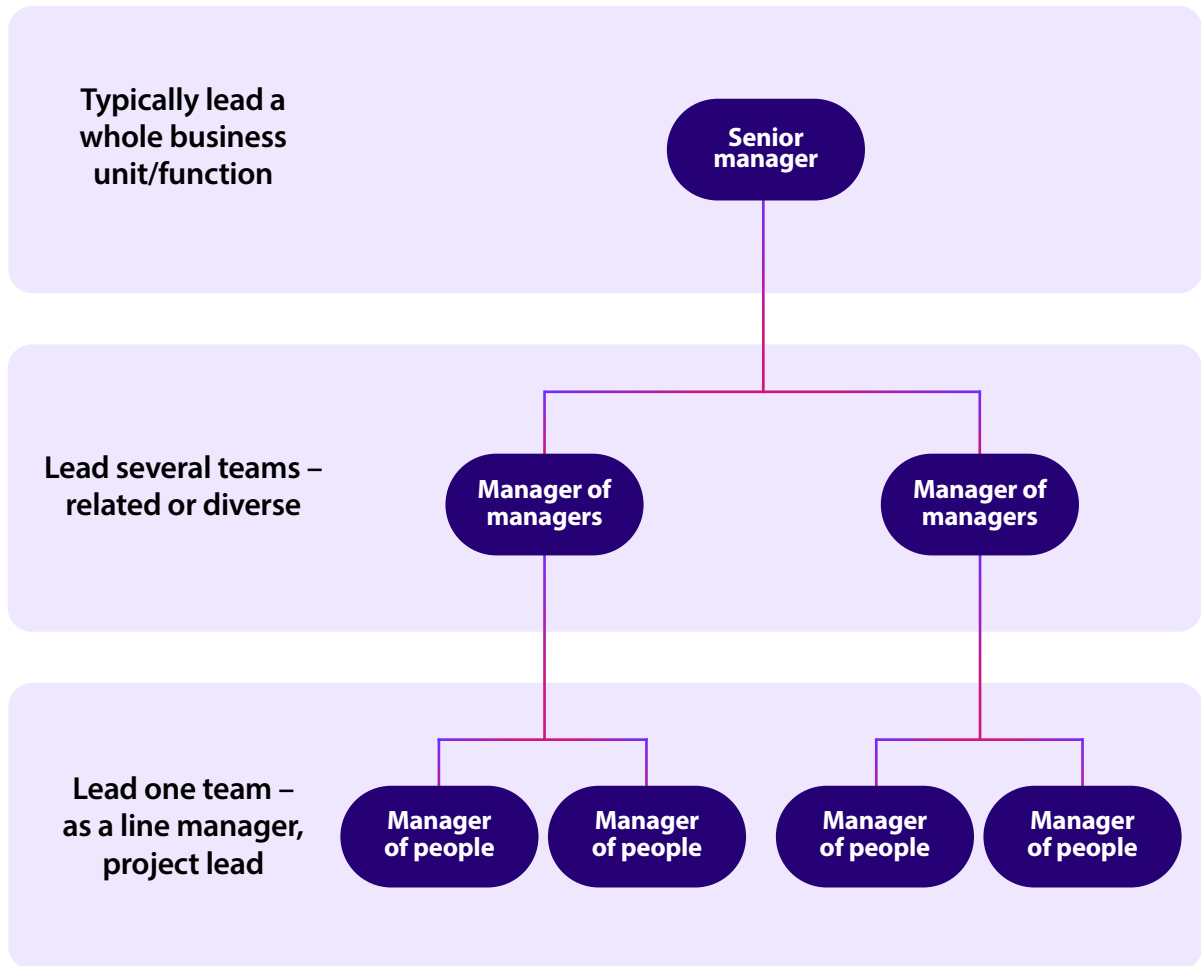
Read on to discover:

- ① **What really is a 'manager of managers' – the true essence of the position**
- ② **The unique impact on performance and culture**
- ③ **Why it can be the trickiest position to occupy in an organisation – typical challenges**
- ④ **The top ten capabilities all the best 'manager of managers' need**
- ⑤ **How to navigate the transition successfully – including practical top tips**



1 What really is a 'manager of managers' – the true essence of the position

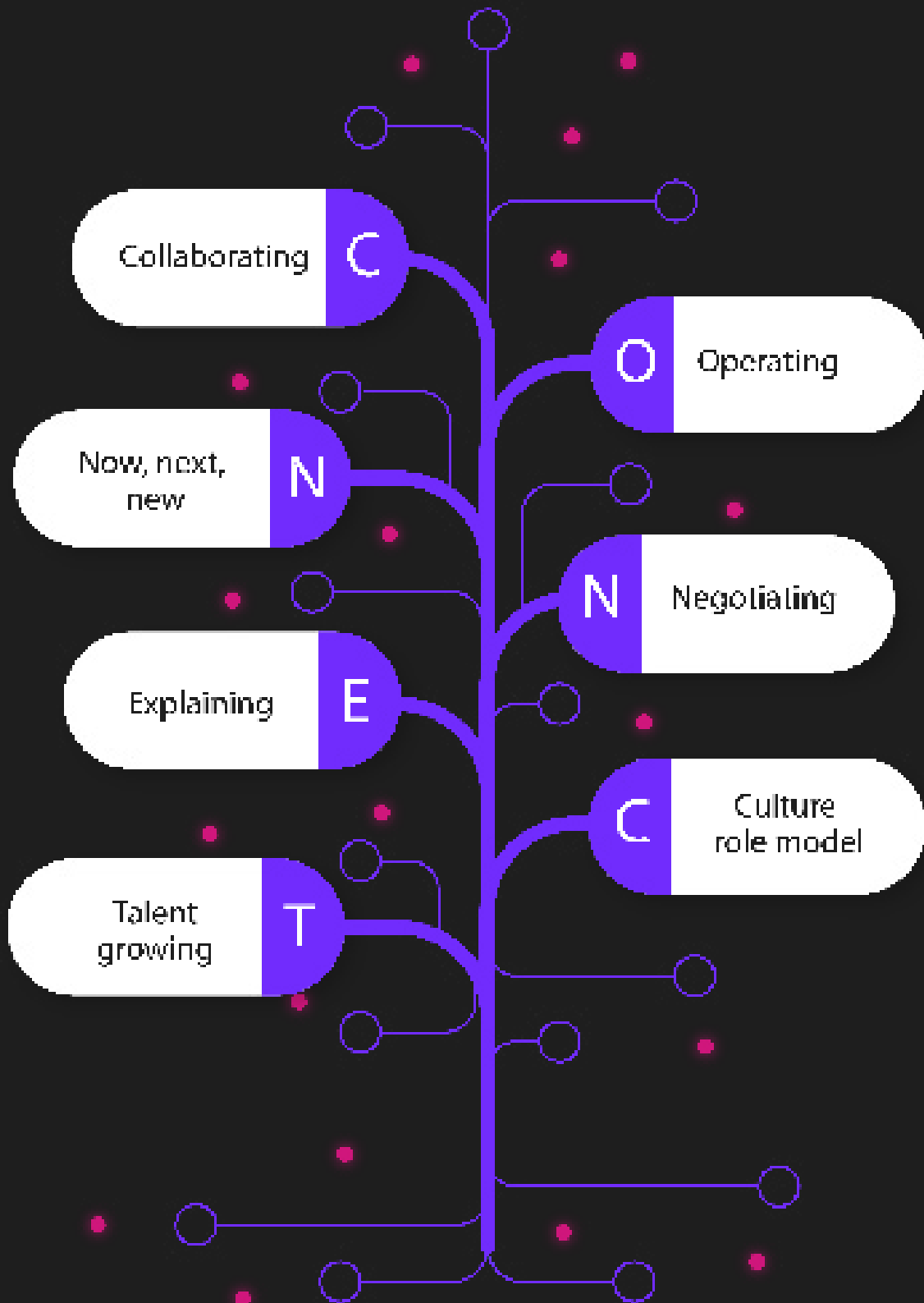
In short, a manager of managers is a leader whose remit spans several teams.



The teams you lead may be related in nature (for example, in one function like a Head of Finance) or varied (for example, a transformation project leader with several disparate teams). Depending on the size of the organisation, there can be several levels of 'middle management', adding to the complexity.

All management and leadership roles are multi-dimensional, but evidence shows this is even more the case for 'manager of managers'. You have to attend to needs and expectations from many different directions – downwards (several teams), upwards, across (with peers), and outwards (external stakeholders). Facing so many directions at once can leave you feeling very dizzy!

It's a well-developed person who can navigate the maze of demands, find balance among all the pressures and meet the needs of diverse groups of stakeholders.



The framework captures the top priorities for this role, highlighting how it differs from 'manager of people' and 'senior manager'.

Our 'CONNECT' framework – the true essence of the 'manager of managers' role



Collaborating

Fostering healthy collaboration is a major feature of this leadership role. Connectedness across teams, and with peers, is a key predictor of success. Encouraging contention (as opposed to conflict), diverse perspectives, and sharing best practice supports inclusion, innovation and change readiness.



Operating

Efficient and effective operations become even more important as the scope of the role grows. As the conduit – up, down and across – planning, budgeting, reporting, approvals all need to work smoothly or risk swallowing all your time!



Now, next, new

Middle managers find their time horizons become multiple and extended. Whilst senior leaders typically focus on longer term decisions, you must attend to the short term (now), longer term (next), and introducing change (new).



Negotiating

All leadership roles are multi-dimensional, but particularly the 'manager of managers'. Being at the centre of the organisation involves navigating a multiplicity of boundaries, perspectives, expectations, and politics. Agreeing and delivering priorities – up, down and across – can be tricky but is key to success.



Explaining

Explaining strategies, goals, plans, and communication messages is an important activity for this role. "What this means for us is ..." is a common phrase as leaders translate, position and reframe strategic thinking into actionable practice.



Culture role modelling

Senior leaders set the tone for an organisation, but middle managers provide the example – being authentic, role modelling behaviour, what matters most (and least), who is valued (and not), what gets resources, air time etc. The shadow cast is powerful – positive or negative.



Talent growing

With greater reach and wider networks, comes the chance (and responsibility) to engage, grow, retain, and export talent for the benefit of individuals and the organisation. Current and future success depends on continuous team learning and investing in future capabilities.

If this is the nature of this role, what opportunities and challenges can people experience?

2 The unique impact on performance and culture

Middle managers have been described as being at the heart of an organisation, but what might this positioning allow them to do? Evidence shows they possess the ability to shape culture, drive change, and empower their teams.

Unique impact of middle managers

In comparison to top-level leaders, middles are closer to firm operations. This position makes them critical in carrying out strategy (downward influence), but also affords unique information and perspectives useful to a firm in adapting strategy in response to operational needs and environmental demands and opportunities (upward influence). (DeChurch et al, 2010)

They are the engine of the business, the cogs that make things work, the glue that keeps companies together. Especially as remote and hybrid work takes over, middle managers are more important than ever. The most effective are in possession of humane, sophisticated communications skills and the knack to mediate and find common grounds between actors at different levels in the organisation (HBR, 2021)

They can serve to motivate every single employee to act and engage them with a compelling mission and vision. They can create a culture of clear accountability. They can build relationships that create trust, open dialogue, and full transparency. They can also be empowered to make decisions based on productivity, not politics (WEF, 2022)

Middle managers hold the key to team engagement and commitment. Much like the middle child, the middle manager walks the fine line of a social maze, navigating between their leader's expectations and their team's exasperations. They can show up as relentless, capable and willing to take on more change (Noureddin, 2021)

Middle managers influence the amount of time people managers spend with their teams, more than senior managers. Where middle and junior managers spend more time with their own immediate boss, they also tend to spend more time with their own team members (CIPD, 2014)

This group can inspire the mass to action while balancing the pressures of monthly deliverables and conflicting priorities. You want to empower your middle managers to engage in the change from the onset (Forbes, 2021)

An impactful role, but also not an easy one.

3 Why it can be the trickiest position to occupy in an organisation – typical challenges

According to a survey by the Society for Human Resource Management, only 48% of middle managers feel satisfied with their jobs. There are a host of articles and studies suggesting middle management is tougher than senior leadership roles or individual contributor roles. But what is it that makes the position so tricky?

Why being in the middle is so challenging

As liaisons between senior management and the people on the ground, they're responsible for playing and translating both the 'finite and the 'infinite game', a unique responsibility that can make or break a business (Simon Sinek, 2021)

They suffer from being in contradictory roles—as owners of a problem, but also those who must solve the problem. They are directing work and they are performing work—the dual nature can be challenging (Columbia University)

They feel like go-betweens without enough influence. In the shadows—asked to execute, rather than provide expertise (Kansas University)

Middle managers can spend 50% of their time on administrative tasks, leaving little room for other responsibilities (BetterUp study)

Middle managers are often faced with the challenge of implementing something they haven't influenced and may not fully agree with. During change, they must manage themselves at the same time as managing others (Hemsley)

Middle managers are under pressure for all kinds of results. They must hit the numbers, stay on schedule and meet customer demand, but they must also ensure people are retained and that wellbeing is supported (Bower in Forbes, 2023)

“ Especially today, as companies become more reliant on virtual modes of management and communication, investing in these managers as “connecting leaders” is vital. ”

(HBR, 2021)

4

The top ten capabilities all the best 'manager of managers' need

Drawing on 30 years of leadership development expertise, the latest research, insight from subject experts, and customers globally, we developed our new Hemsley model of management and leadership.

All managers lead and all leaders manage

We find the most important leadership and management capabilities are consistent across levels. Managers of people, managers of managers, senior leaders and executives all need these same key capabilities and alignment across levels brings real benefits of coherence, reinforcement and scalability.

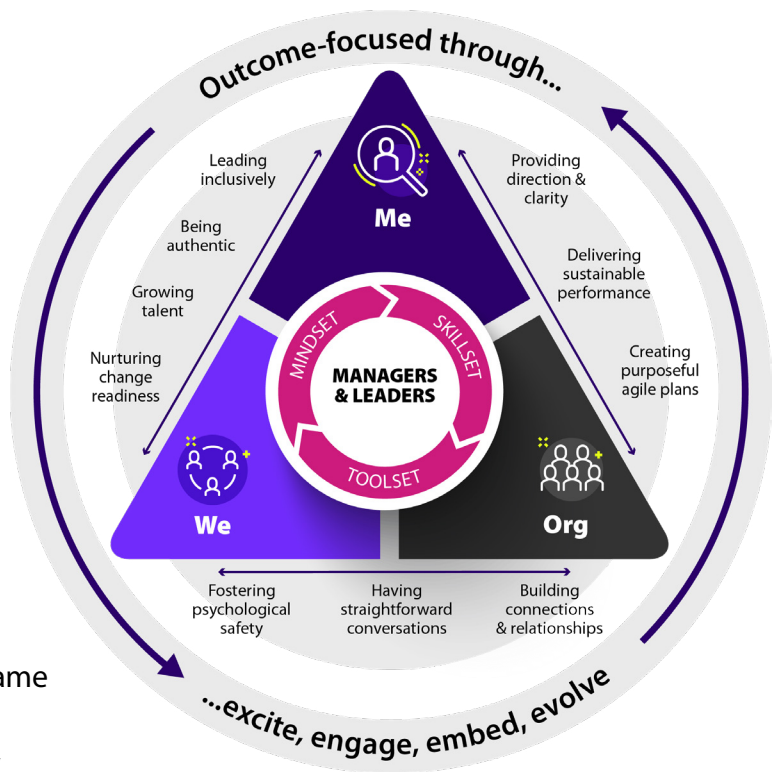
Of course, how you practice and demonstrate them will differ, reflecting the scope and context of the role. As your scope grows, you also need to grow your capability and level of leadership practice.

Capabilities are cumulative in nature - a 'manager of managers' and a 'senior leader' needs the capabilities of the 'manager of people' plus higher-level practice.

Boosting capabilities to the next level of practice

Whilst managers may have developed capabilities in their role as a 'manager of people', shifting to a 'manager of managers' is a major leadership transition. It's a challenging role, as we know, so investing wisely and in a timely way is critical – for the manager and their teams.

It may seem like a lot, and it is, but the good news is the foundations for these capabilities will probably have been laid before. They will need to shift and extend these capabilities, rather than start from scratch.



5 How to navigate the transition successfully – including practical top tips

Firstly, let's acknowledge that all transitions can be challenging, but with the right support it can also be a more positive and growthful experience. Research shows any important transition involves navigating three phases: **endings**, **neutral zone**, and **new beginnings** (William Bridges).



The ending phase

The ending phase is saying goodbye and letting go of the comfort and safety of your past and old ways. There is usually a sense of loss. Endings are important to acknowledge and doing so can help move forward.

What might you need to let go of that you don't need anymore, or could hold you back?



The neutral zone

The neutral zone phase is a time of uncertainty between what was and will be in the future. It's an uncomfortable time for most leaders, who are used to knowing the answers. A time of chaos, possibility, learning and experimentation.

What support would be useful to make sense of what's going on/create space to experiment?



The new beginnings

The new beginnings phase is where you accept and operate effectively in the changed context. There is no going back. You can't unknow what you now know. You can't be who you were. You embody your new perspective, knowing, and skills.

What needs to be true/in place for you to fully step into all this role involves?

This is a significant leadership transition – requiring a shift in mindset, skillset and toolset. Here are typical things we hear...



“ Moving from a people manager to a middle manager requires shifting from being a player on the field to a coach on the sidelines. It's about enabling others to perform, not doing it all yourself. ”

“ The transition to middle management is like climbing a mountain. The higher you go, the broader your perspective needs to be. It's no longer just about your team, but about how your team fits into the larger organisation. ”

“ As a middle manager, your role shifts from managing people to managing systems and processes. Your success is measured not just by what you do, but by what you enable others to do. ”

Multifaceted transitions, such as this, don't happen overnight, and can involve recycling through the phases.

Just as you think you're in 'new beginnings' you realise you're back in the 'neutral zone' again – unsure what to do or feeling overwhelmed!

Top tip: Transitions are a great time for coaching – to help make sense of what's going on in a safe environment.

Herminia Ibarra (Professor at Harvard Business School) emphasises the importance of active experimentation and learning from experience during career transitions. It's not just about knowing what you want to do, but also about trying new things, interacting with different people, and making sense of your experiences. This process helps individuals to forge a new professional identity that fits their new role, and is authentic for them.

Practical tips for 'manager of managers'



Collaborating

Update and extend the reach of your network – start by refreshing existing connections you haven't spoken to for a while.

Get curious about the difference between contention and conflict and who you know that encourages challenge constructively.



Operating

Establish a reassuring and clear rhythm of planning, reporting, progress reviews – up and down – that are sufficient but not onerous.

Explore using a proven framework to ensure clear accountability for decision making – such as Bain's 'RAPID' framework.



Now, next, new

Pull together existing plans across different time horizons (e.g. 3 months, 1-2 years, 5 years) and review for alignment, clarity, inspiration.

Identify one priority to champion improvement/innovation.



Negotiating

Gather the top three priorities key stakeholders (up, down, across) need from you – put them on one page, ensure coherence, share full summary.

Compare the boundaries you find (or anticipate being) easiest and trickiest to manage – what do you notice?



Explaining

Set up communication processes to ensure your teams have the context, currency and clarity they need – expect to review and improve.

Reflect on your values and how they influence your authentic style – what is natural for you, what is tricky?



Culture role modelling

Gather input from your teams about the 'shadow you cast' as a leader – what does your behaviour suggest matters most (and least) to you?

Reflect on how comfortable you are to speak up in your various different contexts – including new more senior groups.



Talent growing

Assess how diverse and healthy your talent pipeline – what evidence can you gather from existing data sources in your organisation?

Define the future capabilities your teams need to succeed and build these into your plans and budget.

It is a challenging time for managers and leaders, but it's also a time for growth, innovation, new possibilities. With the right support, and by focusing on what matters most, we can build and sustain the capabilities we need for today and tomorrow.

“ Everyone has the ability to be a great people manager/leader, and it takes care and attention to grow the confidence, capability and capacity needed. Managing/leading is a privilege. We have the opportunity to grow, connect, inspire, inform, achieve. With support and development we become our best selves, empowering others to be resilient, agile, human. Through focussing on what really matters, and helping others fulfil their potential, we create a sense of belonging, purpose and meaning. By embracing the power of knowing, and not knowing, we are ready for tomorrow. ”

(Hemsley's management and leadership philosophy)



Resources

For further insight on each of the core capabilities, please follow the links to relevant pages on our website, as well as other business research. We also note offline publications where relevant.

“ Middle managers are the gatekeepers of team morale. Their shadow cascades across multiple functions within the organisation, thus creating a ripple effect with their peers and cross-functional teams. ”

(Noureddin, Forbes, 2021)

Further reading

Hemsley Fraser Management & Leadership Framework: [Management & Leadership Framework | Hemsley Fraser](#)

Winning Gold with CCEP For Best Leadership Development Programme & Best Development Programme for Frontline Leaders: [Gold with CCEP For Leadership Development | Brandon Hall Awards \(hemsleyfraser.com\)](#)

[Middle level managers are the heart of your company | McKinsey](#)

[What's the Value of Middle Management? | Simon Sinek \(youtube.com\)](#)

[Middle Managers Have It Bad: 5 Things They Need Most \(forbes.com\)](#)

[To fix workplace culture, fix middle management. Here's how | World Economic Forum \(weforum.org\)](#)

[The Middle Manager Paradox: Why They Struggle and What Can Be Done \(thehrdigest.com\)](#)

Bridges, W. (2004.) Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes (2nd edn.), Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press

Ibarra, H. (2003). Working Identity: Unconventional Strategies for Reinventing Your Career. Harvard Business School Press

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