

Middle Managers Feel Squeezed

By Michael Laff

In an era of downsizing and doing more with less, frontline workers aren't the only employees feeling pinched. Middle managers are next in line in terms of frustration, according to a recent survey.

When asked to provide a one-word description about their organization, 26 percent of middle managers said it was "mismanaged," while another 25 percent described their organization as "successful." These two widely divergent responses stood out in an Accenture survey titled "Middle Managers Outlook."

Compensation weighed heavily as a source of frustration for managers, who ranked it first along with an inability to balance one's work and personal life. Surprisingly, the need to be available to the office ranked low, at only 17 percent.

The survey included responses from 200 middle managers in the United States. The top two responses made for an odd juxtaposition. Ed Jensen, managing partner with Accenture's human performance practice, calls the juxtaposition of the two polar opposites "unusual."

"I expected that a relatively high percentage would say successful," Jensen says. "That group aspires to a higher position, and they are working for the company they want to be with for their career. But there is an increasing level of polarization between managers who are either very happy or very unhappy."

The disgruntled group is headed in the opposite direction, forced to carry out orders they disagree with. Other common sources of discontent are bonuses that are tied to the company's performance instead of individual performance.

"Middle managers are really feeling squeezed," Jensen says. "With all of the downsizing and the acquisitions, who gets hit? The middle manager. A lot of them say they are working harder than ever and are being asked to do more, but their compensation is not increasing."

Another factor at play is the expanding job market. Jensen says that in 2003 and 2004, job prospects were tight so many managers expressed job satisfaction when faced with limited opportunities. Now that the market has opened up and companies boast about flexible benefits, some managers believe greener pastures exist.

Companies are actively promoting their benefits—such as working from home or flex time—only to pull them off the table when talking with middle managers. While a company may say that employees can work from home, the reality is not practiced because managers are expected to be in the office five days a week for the first two years on the job. Jensen says this is largely a communication problem in addition to a strategic failure because organizations have failed to think creatively in terms of offering long-term incentives for middle managers.

Jensen says organizations have reached an "inflection point" whereby they recognize the need to offer more creative incentives to attract and retain employees. The variable bonuses tied to company performance worked in leaner times but are now counterproductive if a competitor awards increased pay based upon individual performance.

Michael Laff is a senior associate editor of T+D; mlaff@astd.org.

The BIG Number

26%

of middle managers describe their organization as mismanaged.

>>How Middle Managers Describe Their Organizations



How would you describe your companies? (based on 200 respondents)

Mismanaged	26%
Successful	25%
Ethical	10%
Diversified	9%
Aggressive	5%
Intelligent	5%
Dominant	4%
Corrupt	3%
Enlightened	3%
Downtrodden	2%

Source: 2006 Accenture study, "Middle Managers Outlook"



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