

The Truth about Middle Managers: Who They Are, How They Work, Why They Matter.

Paul Osterman. Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2008. 189 pp. \$35.00.

The Truth about Middle Managers describes how middle managers in U.S. companies perceive their work roles, top executives, and their organizations in general. According to Paul Osterman, the goal of his book is to understand what has happened to middle managers as firms have restructured. This restructuring—associated with process reengineering and greater use of ad hoc and project teams—shapes a context in which middle managers feel insecure about their jobs, are resigned to low upward mobility, and resent the perceived disproportionate benefits that top executives receive. As a result, although middle managers take craft pride in their work and feel loyal to their colleagues, they become alienated from their organizations and feel more removed from top management.

Osterman suggests that middle managers in U.S. corporations live in a “small world” that has limited horizons. Beyond focusing on their day-to-day jobs and committing to their colleagues, the middle managers he studied saw no larger purpose in what they were doing. This suggests, among other things, that middle managers are neither truly committed to their employers nor fully engaged in executing the firm’s strategy. This finding is supported by Osterman’s survey of recent M.B.A. graduates, who hold a deeply cynical view of their employers. He suggests several intriguing avenues by which to increase middle managers’ higher sense of purpose about their jobs, such as building a legitimate community of professional managers akin to other professions such as doctors and lawyers, or engaging middle managers in management development programs that offer them the opportunity to be exposed to broader strategic issues and to interact with top executives.

I would extend Osterman’s point a bit further by suggesting that his findings have important consequences for the long-term competitive advantage of U.S. corporations. Based on my research published in this journal (Huy, 2002) and its associated piece in the *Harvard Business Review* (Huy, 2001), I found that middle managers can play four critical roles—which senior executives cannot do as well—in fostering continuous innovation and strategic renewal: the intrapreneur; the translator between abstract strategic vision and practical implementation; the emotion manager of their subordinates and peers; and balancing change and continuity. Successfully executing strategy requires people who understand the technical and social fabrics of their organizations deeply. The tacit knowledge and social skills required to utilize informal and formal channels to improvise when encountering surprises are critical to successful strategy execution, and this comes from people with substantial tenure who have shown that they have earned their colleagues’ trust and respect. Many of these people are likely to be in the middle management ranks. Devaluing the role of middle managers and demoralizing them without discriminating individuals who perform from those who do not could

thus produce harmful consequences for the long-term competitiveness of companies.

In general, this book provides a useful, fresh empirical validation of what I and various other researchers on middle management have similarly observed in their prior research (Floyd and Woolridge, 1996; Westley, 1990). In this respect, the findings also have a lot of face validity and would represent an informative read for scholars and practitioners who are interested in knowing the attitudes of U.S. middle managers in regard to different aspects of their workplace.

The book is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1, "Introduction," describes the key findings, some of which I summarized above. Chapter 2, "New Realities," reviews the evolving circumstances and perceptions about middle managers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Chapter 3, "Middle Management by the Numbers," presents statistics about middle managers, including demographics, wages, and tenure. Chapter 4, "The Changing Role of Middle Management," highlights how middle managers' stress levels increased sharply as their jobs became broader and more complex. Because of delayering and downsizing, middle managers make the kinds of trade-offs and decisions that usually fall on general managers. Team management skills become important, as middle managers have to hold their teams together internally and play ambassadorial roles across teams. Chapter 5, "Careers in the Middle," describes the various factors behind the reduced upward mobility for middle managers. Chapter 6, "Shifting Commitments," explains why middle managers display very different levels of loyalty: moderate to low to their organizations and top executives, relatively high loyalty to their craft work and proximal colleagues. Some of the reasons include companies' increasingly transactional treatment (contractual work for pay) of employees, middle managers' perception of top executives as greedy and self-dealing, with excessively generous compensation structures, and increased hiring of top executives from the outside that reduces upward mobility for middle managers. Chapter 7 summarizes and speculates on the way forward, including the role of corporate governance.

I would suggest that time-constrained ASQ readers start reading the book from the end, with chapter 7, to get a general understanding of the key points of the book and then selectively read the chapters of interest according to the synopsis I offer above. Although the book offers many insights, it could probably have been shortened by at least a third. There were many long anecdotal quotes in the book representing middle managers' opposing points of views that could either have been shortened or removed. Some points are overelaborated, and the book might have been even more impactful if it had been shorter. I nevertheless commend the author for a clearly written and engaging text.

For an ASQ audience, however, the book is long on description and short on theory, which was probably not the author's goal. I would like to have seen a tighter model depicting the social and organizational context, middle managers' attitudes, feelings, and behaviors, and how these influence various

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measures of company performance. The “So-what?” question is relatively underdeveloped. I would like to have seen a more textured description of middle managers’ actions and their varying contributions (or damages) to their team’s performance and business unit effectiveness rather than just an emphasis on their attitudes and feelings. Chapter 4 could have been richer and more insightful in this regard.

Finally, one major limitation of this book, in my view, is that it is purely U.S.-centric. In a world that has become increasingly global and diversified, the title of the book is somewhat misleading. Based on my research on middle managers in various multinationals across the world, the low loyalty to their organization and the “small world” experienced by U.S. middle managers—assuming that this is the “truth,” as the title of the book implies—may not be experienced at the same levels by middle managers in companies based in Asia or Europe, for example. Comparing and contrasting the various multinational contexts and the attitudes and behaviors of a more international group of companies might have provided new insights into how U.S. corporations could motivate their middle managers better. But this limitation represents an opportunity in itself for future research, and we thank Paul Osterman for potentially increasing scholarly interest in this important topic.

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