

NOVEMBER 22, 2022

Middle Managers, Top Priority

Outdoor Industry's Opportunity to Retain Staff and Drive Business Results



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Abstract

This report provides insight into the leadership needs of middle managers in the outdoor industry. It includes an introduction of global marketplace trends regarding middle managers, an overview of original research, participants, and findings, recommendations for organizations wanting to support middle management, and resources for middle managers. [1]

Introduction

Retaining engaged employees, who drive purpose and performance, is an important business strategy. The list of benefits associated with engaged employees is profound; in short, employees are your most valuable asset and engaged employees will yield the greatest contributions to your organization. However, The Great Resignation and Quiet Quitting are impacting most organizations and retention strategies that worked in the past may no longer be effective.

"Middle managers are 46% less satisfied with their jobs than senior executives."

Harvard Business Review

What researchers are finding from the global marketplace is that we need to focus on middle management as one strategy to retain a healthy workforce. [2] According to a Harvard Business Review article, middle managers are 46% less satisfied with their jobs than senior executives. In part due to the pandemic, they struggle more than twice as much as executives when it comes to maintaining a sense of belonging, and they feel more stressed and less productive. [3] Only 63% of middle managers planned to stay in their jobs in 2022, compared to 83% in 2021. [4]

The Future Forum asserts that middle managers are more at risk of burnout than anybody else in the organization. [5] When we consider why, these statistics make perfect sense. Middle managers are charged with understanding the organization's vision, purpose, and strategy and then parlaying that into terms that motivate workers to execute tasks, while creating community, building trust, ensuring performance and process improvement, values alignment, clarifying misunderstandings, et cetera. We've heard middle managers likened to being the rope in a game of tug-of-war – not particularly alluring imagery.

A middle manager's job used to be executed in person, in one or more fixed locations, and during the course of a shift/workday. Now, many middle managers are expected to tend to all of their responsibilities and their team members in person, in virtual meetings, asynchronously, across time zones and flexible schedules, making it even more challenging to connect staff to each other and the mission of the organization, over a broader time frame (e.g., early morning, late at night, weekends). Add to that needing to learn how to use new software and teach their teams to do so, as well as tending their own and their team's increasing mental health challenges. Imagine if 37% of your middle managers resigned? [6] Where would you be? Did you experience such an exodus in 2021-2022?



Being in the business of leadership development, the aim of our research was to garner insight into the leadership needs of middle managers in the outdoor industry. [7] Much of the marketplace is now calling for two middle management tracks: a technical emphasis that doesn't involve managing people (as not all employees are interested in - nor are particularly good at - managing people); and a people management track. In the latter track,

“Middle managers should be empowered to focus on the vital work of forging connections, building belonging among diverse employees, and developing talent. This means investing in training for communication skills, inclusion techniques, and coaching.” [8]

More specifically, our research focused on those who manage people – and want to. For those interested in the research methodology, as well as participant recruitment and demographics, please see Appendix A. For those who are more interested in getting right to the research findings, read on.

Research Findings

An individual participant's interview data does not speak directly to the experiences of all middle managers in the outdoor industry. However, the power of qualitative research is identifying themes and patterns that emerge from interview data, which can provide insight into the experiences and needs of the larger outdoor industry middle management population. The following provides a brief synopsis of the research findings – both in terms of emergent themes, as well as participant's anomalous insights.

Most people's reasons for both entering and staying in the outdoor industry were altruistically weighted and included helping people get outside, creating a more inclusive outdoor industry, using the outdoor industry as an advocacy platform for such critical issues as climate change, sustainable design, JEDI (justice, equity, diversity & inclusion), mental health, and land and water protection.

Personal preferences held less weight, but were important, such as not wanting a desk job (though part of every research participant's job did entail desk time), adventure, the people and conversations, seeking room for growth, values alignment, and lifestyle. One person commented on the poor pay in the outdoor industry – especially in middle management. This is interesting to note, as the interview question did not inquire about pay.

Just as there is not one definition of leadership in the global marketplace, participants' exact definitions of leadership varied, but they all asserted:

Leadership skills are crucial for middle management.

Like many organizational management researchers, the participants in our study noted that middle managers are the link between executives and new hires/front-line workers/emerging leaders. Two explanations of leadership stood out that represented tenets heard in all answers and resonated with the above-cited HBR article:

- Sharing vision and strategy; moving people and business in the right direction, while evolving people; helping people feel heard and have agency; being a listener, mentor, delegator, and fostering inclusivity.



- "Biking is a great metaphor for leadership. On a mountain bike trip, you can either lead from the front and set a pace leading the group, or you can give the group the skills to know their route and lead from the front, and then support those who don't have the capacity and are slower, less confident and less able, at the back and get the whole group to the destination as a team and thus support their journey."

Another research participant's insight captured the sentiment of all participants, regarding leadership being critical to middle management:

“ Nothing would happen without people. You can have best product – even have great sales – but if people in organization aren't thriving, it impacts the bottom line. Culture begins with leaders. Middle management needs support and fulfillment to put forward a great leadership environment for those they're leading and managing.

Two themes emerged in participants' responses to the skills, attributes, and training that served them well entering middle management: Interpersonal skills (e.g., listening, relationships, collaboration, communicating, earning trust, networking) and initiative. One participant noted, "In my experience, middle managers don't get real training, but have some existing personality and competence traits that are seen by those in administrative roles and therefore are capitalized on."

Being promoted for doing a great job at one level in the organization, but not being given development support at the next level was noted by participants elsewhere in the data.

The four following themes emerged regarding where research participants lacked entering middle management:

- 1** Interpersonal skills associated with leadership, such as having hard conversations/conflict-resolution, balancing relationships as the individuals shifted from peer-to-manager, and managing up;
- 2** Technical skills, such as grasping various platforms (e.g., Teams, Slack), becoming fluent in Excel, and financial skills (someone specifically cited understanding EBIDA);
- 3** Personal management and style refinement, such as needing to establish healthy boundaries, prioritizing, and facilitating an effective meeting; and
- 4** Systems Awareness, such as organizational politics ("what hill to die on") and understanding the bigger picture / reasons for various initiatives.

These were competency areas participants didn't know they needed before entering middle management. This pattern calls for increased transparency regarding skills, attributes, experience, and training needed to be an effective middle manager.

When asked about what surprised research participants about middle management, several specifically commented on the lack of training provided to help them succeed. Further, two themes emerged including: 1. Lots of job responsibilities – and a vast array of responsibilities - for little pay increase; and 2. Lack of empowerment and being underutilized. Insights speaking to the latter theme included:

“I can’t make meaningful change because I don’t have a seat at the table.”

“My priorities, as far as the executive team is concerned, aren’t clear.”

“Being caught in the middle of demands from executives and a lack of understanding regarding strategy / initiatives from my direct reports.”

“Middle managers are still seen as doers and not thinkers.”

“Middle managers aren’t asked for input by executives.”

"The lack of advancement opportunity in middle management was a surprise. Also, the low pay, long hours and little opportunity to move forward were a little disappointing."

When asked how research participants have grown their leadership skillset in middle management, it was interesting to note that very few of them had internal support from their organizations. There were three exceptions: a few organizations host a periodic, optional workshop, learning club, and/or have online mini classes; two provided a small amount of professional development funds (to attend a risk management conference, for example); and Vail Resorts’ internal leadership development program. Most people cited pursuing their own growth, using their own money on advanced degrees, online courses, professional coaching, and certification courses. Most also took advantage of free opportunities, such as mentorship, webinars, observation, and on-the-job training.

To reach their potentials in middle management, two themes emerged from the interview data: 1. Further refining personal communication and leadership styles, such as articulating ideas to C-Suite with data to explain and justify, leading through chaos, upholding policy (e.g., a co-worker who doesn't want the COVID vaccine, but it's policy), developing coaching and mentoring skills; and 2. Bolstering technical skills and systems understanding, such as financial acumen, knowledge of corporate process, and project management. In considering what skills they might need to move to the executive level, the main theme that emerged is that they really don’t know – again calling for greater transparency in role responsibilities at various levels. That said, research participants surmised various skills that they might need, such as elevating their prowess making difficult decisions efficiently, budgeting and forecasting, “negotiating all day”, fundraising, and systems understanding.



We asked research participants what sorts of leadership development opportunities are lacking in their organizations and/or the outdoor industry.

The main theme to emerge is that our industry has a huge opportunity to better support employees' development in general and, particularly, regarding leadership.

Similar to findings above, middle managers need a mix of interpersonal/emotional intelligence and technical upskilling, such as having difficult conversations, leading with empathy, and self-awareness, leading with a JEDI lens, performance management, strategic and financial acumen, Microsoft Office Suite fluency, and long-term / strategic thinking.

There was a smattering of desired means of garnering these skills, including one-on-one professional coaching with a certified coach, mentorship, robust onboarding (again, with a JEDI lens), and via leadership development programs – whether internal (e.g., Vail Resorts, Christy Sports) or external. Skip Yowell Future Leadership Academy filled the outdoor industry leadership development and mentorship niche for a handful of years, but it dissolved during the pandemic.

Please see Appendix B for leadership development courses currently offered.



The last question in each interview asked people to share their recommended leadership development resources. A diverse list of suggestions can be found in Appendix B, where you can also find the names and links for currently-offered leadership development courses for your employees (or yourself).

Based on the themes that emerged from our data, particularly when contextualized by marketplace middle management research trends and insights, we recommend tending to your middle managers in the six ways highlighted below.

6 Recommendations to Support & Retain Middle Managers

The list below is, by no means, exhaustive, but we hope it will help you support middle managers, a key demographic to nurture if you're interested in fostering a thriving organization.

1. EQUITABLE PAY

Investigate your pay structure to ensure that middle managers' pay is commensurate with their current job responsibilities (rather than pre-COVID levels), considering executives' pay and the pay of those being led by middle managers.

3. EMPOWERMENT

Ensure that middle managers are empowered to do their jobs by giving them clear priorities, soliciting their input, mentoring them, being clear about which decisions are theirs, etc. Settle on a meeting cadence that suits the organization, the middle managers, and their supervisors.

5. SHOW MIDDLE MANAGERS THEY'RE VALUED

Express your gratitude for middle managers, which can be done in myriad ways such as helping them experience value alignment at work, genuinely thanking them for the various things they do (be specific!), and providing raises/promotions/bonuses, granting extra time off, public praise, etc.

2. ROLE TRANSPARENCY

Create a middle management competency, role and responsibility checklist, so middle managers know what's needed to reach and excel at that level. Consider two middle management tracks: one that's skills-focused and one that's people focused. For the latter, ensure that you include both technical and interpersonal skills. For both, include pay ranges. We also recommend facilitating role transparency for the executive level as one tool to help with succession planning.

4. PROFESSIONAL COACHING & MENTORSHIP

Offer one-on-one professional coaching and help interested middle managers find a mentor, who doesn't need to be in the same organization. The power of and yearning for mentorship was a strong theme that emerged multiple times in the data.

6. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Invest in their leadership development through training/courses. When you do this, ensure that you also take something off their plate, so they have time to engage in their development. Remember, investing in their upskilling and leadership development is an investment in one person that will have positive ripple effects across the person's team and the business.

Conclusion

The outdoor industry is young, so it is perhaps understandable that we're lagging compared to other industries in such areas as pay, industry-specific advanced degrees and certifications, organized advocacy efforts, deep JEDI work, and robust professional development. However, there is also clear momentum in most of these areas. We're confident that more and more organizations will understand how critical it is to invest in the development of their people, especially middle managers, as a means to create thriving businesses that contribute to an even more robust outdoor industry.

About the Authors

[Dr. Brooke Moran](#) and [Paul Tame](#) are co-owners of [Zen for Business](#), a culture, employee engagement, and leadership development consultancy focused on elevating the effectiveness of purpose-driven individuals, teams, and organizations.



In addition to facilitating executive leadership development for over two decades, they have held many roles in the outdoor industry, including instructor, sales associate, professor, risk manager, operations, culture and leadership development workshop designer and facilitator, certified professional coach, and outdoor adventure enthusiast.

They co-designed and co-facilitate [Zenith Leadership Experience](#), a leadership development course for middle managers with virtual and in-person options. They updated the course's content, based on the findings of their study.

Zen for Business is based in Gunnison, Colorado; Brooke and Paul work locally, regionally, globally, and virtually.

Appendix A:

Overview of Research Methodology & Participants

We gathered qualitative research data via 45-60-minute, semi-structured interviews over Zoom. Self-selecting interview participants were recruited by three means:

1. Inviting study participation via Zen for Business' and our social media (i.e., LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook);
2. Inviting study participation via Basecamp Outdoor Facebook Group; and
3. Pursuing interview participants' recommendations of additional people to interview.

There were three interview prerequisites for prospective participants:

1. Middle management experience in the outdoor industry;
2. Availability for a 45-60-minute interview; and
3. Consent.

We conducted interviews until we reached saturation, meaning that we stopped finding new themes, ideas, or patterns. Ultimately, we interviewed 14 employees in outdoor industry; the majority of study participants were middle managers, while four had progressed to the executive level at the time of the interviews. Participants' years in the industry spanned 5 to 32 years, averaging nearly 16 years. Their years in middle management ranged from 6 months to 25 years, and they were between 27 and 55 years old, with eight being in their 30s. Eleven female-identifying and three male-identifying people participated in the study. Thirteen research participants live and work in the United States and one lives and works in Australia.

While research participants worked at the following organizations at the times of their interviews, all had worked at multiple other organizations in the outdoor industry, as well as organizations outside of the industry, lending to expanded perspectives: Outward Bound (2), The Trust for Public Lands, Vail Resorts, La Sportiva, Black Diamond Equipment, Ruffwear, Integrated Growth, Adventure Cycling, Sanitas Sales Group, Outdoors New South Wales (Australia), Vermont Adaptive Ski & Sport, Icebreaker, Semper Fi & America's Fund.

Three research participants had specialized in talent development sometime during their careers, so they provided insights from both their experiences as middle managers, as well as trends they noticed among middle managers in their organizations while in talent development.

Appendix B:

Leadership Development Resources

The list below is meant to help all employees access the resources they need to elevate their effectiveness. This list is not exhaustive, by any means, as most recommendations came straight from research participants, so be resourceful and find the support you need at the various stages of your career.

Courses

Middle Management

- [Zenith Leadership Experience](#) (Disclaimer: we designed and facilitate this course, and we just recently updated the course content, based on this study's findings)
- [Outdoor Industry Business Certificates](#)

Emerging Leaders

- [Leadership Lab & Leadership Institute](#)

For All / Mixed Audience

- [These Schools Can Help You Break into the Outdoor Industry](#)
- [Outdoor Industry Association Webinars and Podcasts](#)
- [Camber Outdoors Programs](#)

Books & Journals

- Brené Brown – many options, including *Dare to Lead*
- *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard* by Chip Heath and Dan Heath
- Simon Sinek – many options, including *Leaders Eat Last*
- *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie
- Jim Collins' books, including *Good to Great*
- Harvard Business Review
- Fast Company
- Gallup for employee engagement focus

Podcasts

- [Work-Life](#) with Adam Grant
- Taking it for Granted with Grant Smith
- Unlocking Us and/or Dare to Lead with Brené Brown
- [Climbing Gold](#) with Alex Honnold and Fitz Cahall
- [Huberman Lab](#)

Blog

- [Ask A Manager](#) by Alison Green

Assessments

- [Emergenetics profile](#)
- [Color Code Personality Science](#)
- [Leadership Circle Profile](#)

Videos

- [Management Training: Delegating Effectively](#)
- Brené Brown – [The Power of Vulnerability](#) (TEDTalk) and [The Call to Courage](#) (Netflix)

Additional Tips & Resources

- Advanced degrees (e.g., MA in Organizational Systems Renewal, Outdoor Industry MBA)
- Certification courses (e.g., Refine Your Unique Leadership Style)
- [Everywhere is Queer](#) (map highlighting LGBTQ-owned businesses)
- Follow outdoor-industry-focused affinity groups on social media (e.g., Outdoor Afro, Brown Girls Climb, Pride Outside)
- [Diversity Outdoors](#)
- Interact with and learn from the C-Suite
- Vail Resorts leadership development program – though only available to employees (Camp 1, Camp 2, etc.)
- Mentors (note: nearly every research participant cited the importance of having mentors sometime during their interview)
- Embrace failing forward

Endnotes

1. The findings in this study do not represent all companies and all middle managers. However, the themes that emerge via data analysis, particularly when contextualized by global research on middle managers in diverse industries, provide insight into actionable steps for outdoor industry organizations seeking to support and retain middle managers.
2. How middle management is defined varies a bit (e.g., middle-middle, upper-middle, etc.); for the purposes of our research and this report, we define middle management as those who manage one or more people all the way to the executive level.
3. It's Time to Free the Middle Manager (May 21, 2021) by Brian Elliott. Harvard Business Review.
4. Why is Middle Management leading the Great Resignation by Kate Langford, Jim Kerr, Paola Carranco et al.. Shortlister
5. Why Middle Managers are Feeling the Squeeze and How to Fix It. Wall Street Journal “How We Work” Podcast, hosted by Erin Delmore.
6. This percentage derived from simple subtraction: 100% of middle managers – 63% that plan to stay in their jobs in 2022.
7. We're strong believers that a leader is anyone who develops others and that leadership is multi-faceted, including self-leadership, lateral leadership, active followership, designated leadership, and leading up. So, in our eyes, middle managers ought to consider leadership one of their responsibilities.
8. It's Time to Free the Middle Manager (May 21, 2021) by Brian Elliott. Harvard Business Review.