

A Dale Carnegie White Paper

Mid-Level Management:

An Essential Link Between Strategy
and Execution



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If leadership involves providing for change, movement, and setting the tone, management is responsible for coordinating efforts to get a job done with order and consistency. Yet, despite the need for these groups to work together toward a common purpose and understanding, our research shows that this is not happening. As a result, management can find themselves stuck in the middle between leadership and individual contributors; tasked with communicating and carrying out the desired goals and direction of leadership to their teams where in a perfect world, everyone understands the information in the same way.

This situation becomes more complex as mid-level managers are in a position that requires successful management of both business and human needs while being successful operators as well. This means that depending on the situation, successful managers must be versed in effective leadership approaches as well as they can wear multiple hats throughout the day, playing a dual role of not only a manager, but also as a leader to individual contributors.

To succeed, a high level of communication and the ability to present information with impact is needed across the board as it impacts a variety of important workplace aspects. But are organizations providing the level of training necessary to create alignment fostered by strong communication – particularly for mid-level management?

The short answer is no. Research-based evidence shows that companies overall still struggle with effective communication. Improving in this area can lead to clearer messaging and have a positive impact on key workplace outcomes such as job satisfaction, turnover intention, employee engagement, and many other important components of the workplace.



Dale Carnegie Global Research

The data is clear, organizations around the globe continue to underperform in the area of effective communication.

This brief white paper, informed by Dale Carnegie's ongoing global research efforts,¹ shares observations related to mid-level management and their important position as intermediary between leaders and individual contributors. In doing so, it focuses on the need and opportunity to improve communication at the mid-management level, given their unique role as intermediary between strategy and execution.

The Importance of Mid-Level Management

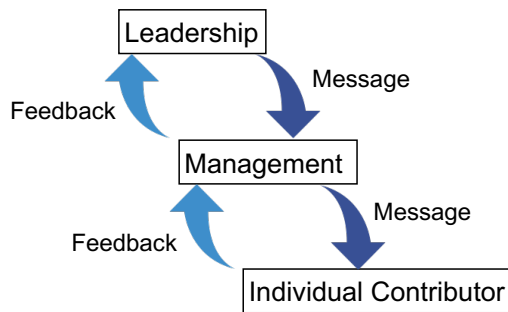
Management creates a bridge between leadership and individual contributors with the responsibility of delivering the vision of leadership to employees. They're tasked and held accountable for successful implementation commonly measured by outcomes and results compared to targets or goals. This puts mid-level management in the position of having to develop and work within multi-level feedback loops.

As many organizations shift toward more decentralized structures with fewer hierarchical layers, effective communication and delivery skills remain foundational—and may be even more critical—as more voices are brought to the table. While flatter hierarchies aim to encourage broader participation, communication within organizations still involves a vertical component. One's position within the structure continues to shape how information is shared, received, and acted upon, making awareness of organizational context essential for effective interaction.

For example, a manager—defined by actions, not just title—is often responsible for overseeing implementation and operations, which naturally involves layers of accountability and interaction. This dynamic is driven partly by the “need to know,” but also by considerations of efficiency and time. Regardless, the manager serves as a critical link in the success or failure of organizational directives, with the quality and clarity of communication playing a major role.

¹ Note: Dale Carnegie & Associates conducts ongoing research on issues affecting and impacting organizations globally. Insights shared as part of this brief white paper are informed by this continued effort and where applicable, specific resources such as more targeted white papers are referenced within.

Figure 1
Managers: Key to Effective Communication



Whatever your organizational structure, companies must reflect on whether they are truly pursuing efficiency and working within successful communication processes, or if they're simply subjecting themselves to traditional approaches built into the culture over time as they pursue future success.

This is not a referendum on current organizational structures, whatever they may be, as context is important. However, it is a call to view them objectively through the lens of each stakeholder and ask if we are truly equipping our workforce to operate at a high level across the board. In the case of the mid-level manager, the data suggests companies are not.

In such a pivotal role of liaison between leadership and individual contributors, failure to step back and recognize this (particularly around the topic of communication) means that goals and objectives are undertaken with obstacles in place at the start; obstacles that mid-level management needs to overcome.

Performance and Change

Considering management's role as intermediary between leadership and individual contributors, there's no denying the importance of mid-level management. They wear many hats — from motivating their teams, aligning efforts with broader goals, and overseeing day-to-day operations — all while working toward long-term objectives. Mid-level management is not just a stepping step to leadership; it is leadership, with direct influence on whether initiatives succeed or fail.

But how much credit should mid-level management get for the successes and how much blame should they take for the failures or areas that fall short in relation to performance?

This question is rhetorical but important as it forces us to think about the context of the work environment and how nothing happens in a vacuum. In other words, it's easy to take credit for successes and place blame during failures, but considering the context around the question, opens us up to better identifying influences and solutions as a team.

At a basic level, it's easy for leadership to place blame on management when things go wrong, while also taking credit when things go right. But since management is responsible for translating leadership's initiatives into daily culture and tasks, shortcomings in outcomes shouldn't begin with blaming management—they should begin with examining the clarity and effectiveness of communication from the start. After all, even the best efforts from management can fall short if the message is poorly presented, communicated, or understood by any parties.

Managers believe the level of communication present within work teams is significantly lower than the view held by leaders.

Considering this, with managers accountable for strategy, building consensus with their teams, and the management of people and their outcomes, their ability to present information and communicate it clearly is critical – and even managers themselves recognize there is room for improvement.

For example, focusing on the manager-leadership level for this discussion, our research on teamwork² demonstrated that there is a significant difference and consistent decline between leaders

and managers when rating the level of communication present within their teams.

As managers are the bridge between strategy and action, this drop-off is reminiscent of the telephone game, but with much higher stakes.

² Dale Carnegie & Associates. (2023). A leadership imperative: Creating a culture of high-performing teams. *Global Research Study White Paper*.

Our 2024 global research effort confirmed this disconnect between leaders, managers, and individual contributors regarding communication as well. Across key areas of communication surveyed, we continued to find significant differences in how each group perceived various aspects of communication — with a consistent decline in outlook from leaders down to individual contributors.³

These results should alarm organizations as communication is a vital component of collaboration and success. Table 1 highlights this declining trend across various communication statements and roles. It’s important to note as well that the differences were statistically significant, meaning the differences shown are unlikely to have occurred by chance.

Table 1
Communication Statements: Feedback by Role

% Within Role With a Strong Favorable Perception of the Communication Statement Presented			
	Leader (A)	Manager (B)	Individual Contributor (C)
Employees actively engage in sharing knowledge	35%*	26%**	16%
I receive constructive feedback surrounding my role	37%*	24%**	15%
The company encourages open communication between employees and management	40%*	28%**	17%
When a new task or project is initiated, we discuss it openly, so the goals are clearly understood	39%*	28%**	18%
I have the freedom to ask questions when I need clarity	42%*	34%**	28%
I feel that the goals of my position have been well-defined for me	41%*	26%**	17%
At my organization, we all seem to be on the same page	33%*	19%**	10%

* Indicates statistically significant difference with columns B and C
** Indicates statistically significant difference with column C

Source: Dale Carnegie Research (2024).

This example demonstrates why we refer to mid-level management as being ‘stuck in the middle’ as they consistently fall between leaders and individual contributors. While this may on the surface seem an obvious placement, the concern is that this table refers to the level of communication, a tangible area of focus that clearly has a detrimental impact on companies.

Further, as part of the recent white paper titled Bridging the Gaps,⁴ communication was found to be a significant universal contributor in all predictive models forecasting employee engagement and turnover intention across the levels of employment shown (leaders, managers, and individual contributors).

Since communication between a sender and receiver should incorporate effective feedback loops, these discrepancies should not exist in organizations where outcomes are reliant on clear understanding and alignment by all parties involved.

The question then becomes: Given their central role, do mid-level managers receive the training and support necessary to achieve success? Are organizations focused too narrowly on leadership at the expense of the larger context of an effective communication process?

Of course, leaders do need to be effective communicators and presenters, and this discussion is not to take away from that. In fact, our latest study revealed that between leaders, managers, and individual contributors, leaders received the greatest amount of communication training over the past three years.

On average, only 36% of participants in our 2024 global study received communication training in the past 3 years.

Source: Dale Carnegie & Associates (2024).

But while leaders received the most training, it was managers and individual contributors who identified communication as one of the top soft skills for the future of work — at a higher percentage than leaders.

So, while it's certainly important to provide comprehensive training at the leadership level, it is equally important to provide the same level of skill enhancement to mid-level management tasked with not only receiving the information but then sharing that information with individual contributors in a way in-line with its original intent.

³ Dale Carnegie & Associates. (2024). Bridging the Gaps: Aligning Workplace Perceptions Across Organizational Levels. *State of Organizational Health Global Research Study White Paper*.

⁴ Dale Carnegie & Associates. (2024). Bridging the Gaps.

Opportunities – Presenting and Communicating Information

Regardless of the workplace topic (teamwork, job satisfaction, workplace perceptions, employee engagement, turnover intention, and more) our global research efforts over several years consistently point to communication as a universally impactful area of opportunity and potential competitive advantage for organizations. Despite its importance, it's also an area where many continue to fall short as research clearly shows a high level of disconnect surrounding communication in organizations.

Focusing on communication and the presentation of information is important as it plays a key role in influencing many workplace outcomes; either directly or indirectly helping other factors work more effectively together. Yet with only about one-third of the workforce receiving training to be more effective communicators, there's a clear need for improvement across the board.

In this context, our research shows that mid-level manager responses consistently fall between leaders and individual contributors across various measurement scales, including that of communication. As a key workplace component, this has further importance as communication was found to be a universal contributor in predictive models forecasting employee engagement and turnover intention by role.⁵

With that, given a management's mediating role within an organizational setting — and the impact or influence of communication consistently surfacing across research efforts — how can organizations better equip managers for success?

The answer lies in developing the manager, as someone who interacts across all levels, as an effective communicator who can consistently apply this skillset with both leadership and individual contributors. If managers are to be held accountable for strategy implementation, building team consensus, and overseeing people and their outcomes, then their ability to present and communicate information is clearly critical.

This means they must have the ability to build rapport with people and be able to work effectively with challenging audiences at all levels of the organization. They need to be strong active listeners and be able to both participate in and facilitate constructive, actionable feedback loops. In addition, based on their unique role located between strategy and implementation, once these skills are enhanced, they're in a unique position to help those at all levels be more accountable for their level of communication and promote collaboration, where all understand and take an active role in developing and maintaining an effective communication process.

This can involve elevating one's skillset surrounding several key areas of effective communication such as:

- **Creating buy in** - Organizing thoughts before speaking where the context is considered as ideas are framed, composed, and delivered in a manner that the audience can relate to.
- **Influencing ideas** - Being attentive to how an interaction is initiated as well as considering the impact of closing remarks that influence ideas others walk away with.
- **Building credibility with the audience** - Using data and evidence to back up the ask, support an idea, and identify the "why" to build more credibility.
- **Improving interactions and participation** - Being receptive and open to questions and challenges that lead to improved interactions and participation.
- **Motivating a group to take a specific action** - Be more natural and communicate with an increased level of self-confidence.

Overall, focusing on improved communication and delivery strategies can help mid-level managers communicate with more confidence and exhibit authenticity, resulting in better articulation and buy-in to the message. In addition, a confident communicator will be more willing to accept feedback, further improving the experience and closing the communication loop.

⁵ Dale Carnegie & Associates. (2024). Bridging the Gaps.

Given management's role in motivation, the importance of advancement opportunities in influencing engagement and turnover intentions, and the negative effects of unclear messaging or a perceived lack of buy-in, our global research consistently highlights improving communication and the presentation of information as a key opportunity to enhance workplace outcomes.

Final Thoughts

Organizations who continuously focus on and speak to production, efficiency, and organizational growth at the expense of elevating the level of communication within, continue to create their own hurdles and barriers to success.

While communication is a simple concept in theory, the data shows that effective communication in practice still has a long way to go. It remains a complex and often elusive skill—especially for practitioners juggling multiple tasks throughout the day. As perceptions of communication trend downward across roles within organizations and recognizing that communication always involves both a sender and a receiver, mid-level managers emerge as a critical group for driving improvement. Positioned as intermediaries, they regularly interact across all levels of the organization, giving them a unique opportunity to deliver consistent, effective messaging. Their many touchpoints enable them to influence communication quality organization-wide in a way no other group can.

While all stakeholders play a role in fostering a culture of effective communication, seeing mid-level managers also as daily leaders with a direct connection to the talented individual contributors at the heart of an organization, as well as those tasked with listening, interpreting, and overseeing organizational objectives within the organization, should make the case for the importance of training at this level.

In a global business environment where change is the norm, enhancing our workforce with effective communication and presentation skills can significantly enhance the delivery of information — creating a lasting competitive advantage.

“ **People rarely succeed unless they have fun in what they are doing.** ”

-Dale Carnegie

About the author

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Joining Dale Carnegie in 2023, Robert is responsible for ongoing research into current issues facing leaders, employees, and organizations worldwide. With over 25 years of experience, Robert brings a research-driven approach to help organizations and practitioners identify and address significant areas of impact for workplace improvement.

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