According to a 2015 article in The Atlantic – “The Secret Suffering of the Middle Manager” – a study of 22,000 U.S. workers found that, as a class, middle managers suffered from the highest levels of depression of any group in the workforce. A contributing factor to that depression: they don’t get to make big decisions.

Whether in pop culture, Dilbert cartoons, or business literature, the title “middle manager” is often derogatory, describing a job with frustratingly little power but plenty of responsibility. But this is an unfair characterization because managers outside the C-suite are incredibly important to their organizations and have the power to inspire and uplift their employees.

In that vein, we’ve observed a phenomenon that shows just how powerful non-HR and non-C-level “middle” managers can be: increasingly, these middle leaders are leading the charge in implementing employee engagement strategies at work. It’s important to note that when we use the term “middle manager” or “middle leader,” we’re referring to the broad spectrum of leadership positions, from department heads to team leaders.

Many types of leaders seek TINYpulse as part of a larger engagement strategy. The main feature of TINYpulse is the pulse survey tool, which provides feedback to leaders about what’s going on in the workplace – primarily so they can fix problems quickly. The pulse survey can be particularly useful to leaders of small groups as a way to stay connected to workers, but also to make sure that the company culture remains intact.

In 2014, the leader of the first international office of the inbound marketing company HubSpot came to us looking for an engagement tool for his team. The tool worked so well in that small setting, other managers through the company adopted it, and now some 750 HubSpot employees around the world use it. That type of ground-up adoption has happened numerous times since, particularly within large companies, and it always started with a middle-level leader.

To explore the depth of this phenomenon, we decided to look at a number of data points to see how prevalent middle managers are in leading employee engagement strategies. We used TINYpulse and our own clients as a barometer but also looked outside at the larger world of work. Here’s what we did:

• We measured the frequency of middle leaders and found that about 1 in 5 TINYpulse accounts are owned by non-HR, non-C-level leaders. We did this by looking at a sample of our clients (350) and counting how many are owned by a non-HR, non-C-level leaders. We found that 1 in 5 TINYpulse accounts were started by a middle leader (includes team leaders, department managers).

• After looking at this data, we reached out to some of these middle leaders to gather qualitative feedback about their employee engagement strategies.

• We measured the effectiveness of these middle leaders and found that their employees were better off in significant ways compared to other types of TINYpulse users. We did this by comparing responses TINYpulse survey questions between employees led by middle leaders and those led by C-suite or HR managers.

• We commissioned an independent poll of 500 U.S. workers to find out if their direct manager had taken steps to implement employee engagement tactics in the workplace. Nearly 70% told us that their direct manager had, and of the 30% who answered “no,” a majority (53%) said they would prefer their direct manager to handle employee engagement improvements.
Part II: What the Leaders Say

We estimate that about 20% of TINYpulse users are middle-level managers (non-HR, non-C level). When we spoke to some of these leaders, we found a variety of opinions about their roles as employee engagement leaders.

Grady Karp, an engineering manager at EMC Isilon, feels that direct managers can more easily have an impact on their employees because they’re closer to the action.

“They can encourage participation and can directly impact the work lives of their direct reports,” he said.

Similarly, a managing principal at a consulting firm told us that HR and C-level leaders often “fly too much above the day-to-day minutiae” to be effective at implementing employee engagement strategies.

“At the end of the day, if [middle leaders] oversee the activities or outcomes of their employees, they have a vested interest in their engagement, productivity, and overall satisfaction.”

Max Yoder, CEO of Lesson.ly, pointed out the need for middle-level managers to have access to technology that helps build skills within teams.

“The project managers actually know this best, as they live the details and employees’ engagement,” he said. “At the end of the day, if [middle-management leaders] oversee the activities or outcomes of their employees, they have a vested interest in their engagement, productivity, and overall satisfaction.”

Max Yoder, CEO of Lesson.ly, pointed out the need for middle-level managers to have access to technology that helps build skills within teams.

“In an organization of any size, sales and support teams need training the most. Middle managers of these teams typically understand the challenge and recognize the business value of well-trained team members,” he said. “Progressive organizations know that keeping pace with change means empowering these leaders with innovative software that equips their teams with the fundamental information to do their best work.”

Another manager we spoke to, a director at a consumer electronics company, said that her employee engagement strategy was an effort to be more accountable to employees and help them be happier at work. Her “grassroots” implementation of employee engagement strategies, however, has been noticed.

“We have the eyes and ears of the entire company. The success of implementing an employee engagement strategy is directly related to the passion of the leader,” she said. “That can – and should – be done at every level within an organization.”

A leader of a team of creative professionals in the animation industry told us that he began using TINYpulse after he had to hire an additional 15 employees, significant growth for his team. He was worried that such an expansion would erode his connections with his employees. He began using TINYpulse to maintain those bonds and as a way to increase employee engagement.

“I wanted a way to keep a connection with the team,” he told us. “Plus, I have been interested in ways to keep people engaged and address issues before they got too big.”

In contrast to our idea about middle-led employee engagement, he told us that he feels all levels of leadership should play a role in engagement, saying, “[Middle managers play] as much of a role as HR and the C-suite. I think all leadership – management and technical – plays a role in employee engagement.”

A senior director at a B2C tech company pinpointed the challenge that managers who lead employee engagement strategies face: they aren’t necessarily trained in employee engagement, but they know their teams well.

“HR has dedicated people for whom this is the day job and they are very well positioned to systematically scale it across the organization. However, leaders of business units and functions have the luxury of knowing their own respective teams better, greater likelihood of earning respect and credibility, and direct authority and accountability to act on the feedback to make things better for the team members.”

“I think non-HR leaders are better positioned, but not all of them may have the motivation, training, or inclination to make [employee engagement] a priority. HR leaders have the training and experience but may lack the strong connection with business leaders and may not be always fully in sync with priorities.”
Part III: Employee Outcomes

No matter the opinion of the manager about employee engagement strategy, there’s evidence that employees are better off in some key ways if their direct manager is in charge of employee engagement.

We compared employee responses to TINYpulse questions from middle-led companies to companies whose owners were C-level or in HR. Here are some of the differences we found:

**Less likely to quit:** When asked, “On a scale of 1 to 10, how likely would you be to leave for a 10% raise from another company?” middle-led employees rated an average of 3.5 (on this question, a lower score equals lower likelihood), compared to all others at 4.25.

**Leaders are more responsive:** On the question, “On a scale of 1 to 10, how effectively does our organization take action on feedback you provide?” middle-led employees rated their feeling at 8.09, compared to all others 7.17.

**See more growth potential:** On the question, “On a scale of 1 to 10, how much opportunity do you have for professional growth in this organization?” middle-led employees rated their feeling at 8.31, compared to all others at 7.14.

**Better work-life balance:** On the question, “On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your work-life balance?” middle-led employee rated their feeling at 8.23, compared to all others at 7.09.

On some questions, middle-led employees had a slighter lead over other employees, including on questions around management transparency, fun at work, overall company culture, and satisfaction with coworkers.

In some areas, middle-led employees scored lower than other employees. Middle-led employees feel slightly less valued and were slightly less happy – on the question, “On a scale of 1 to 10, how happy are you at work?” middle-led employees rated themselves 7.39, compared to all others at 7.56.

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**Methodology**

Seventeen TINYpulse organizations were chosen as being started by "middle managers." Responses to questions from these organizations were compared to all other responses. Independent sample tests were conducted to compare the middle manager companies to the others. Significance was found at the 95% level for all questions whose charts were shown, with the exception of the likelihood to leave for a 10% raise. While there was a 20% increase, the sample size was low and thus significance was not found.

For each question shown: How likely would you be to leave for a 10% raise from another company? p=.329. How effectively does our organization take action on feedback you provide? p=.037 (significant at a 95% level of confidence). How much opportunity do you have for professional growth in this organization? p=.029 (significant at a 95% level of confidence). How would you rate your level of work-life balance? p=.002 (significant at a 99% level of confidence). How happy are you at work? p<.001 (significant at a 99% level of confidence)
Part III: What Employees Want

For an outside perspective, we polled 502 employees about whether their direct manager has taken steps to improve employee engagement – and if not, would they like it if they did.

On the first question, “Has your direct manager taken steps to improve employee engagement at work,” 69% answered “yes.” We asked those 69% what steps their direct manager had taken to improve engagement; increased employee recognition, soliciting regular feedback (such as using a tool like TINYpulse), and team social events were the most popular answers.

Of the 30.9% who answered “no” to the first question (“Has your direct manager taken steps to improve employee engagement at work?”), we next asked them, “Would you prefer that your direct manager handled employee engagement?” The result was slightly in favor, with 52.9% answering “yes.” We also asked those respondents to tell us what workplace problems bothered them the most; pay and benefits were number one, with workplace communication, management decisions, and lack of recognition following.

Limeade, a corporate wellness technology company, has seen this in their own research as well. When they surveyed employees in a research partnership with Quantum Workplace, they found that manager support is more important than executive leadership support when it comes to improving employee well-being. Furthermore, they found that well-being technology provides a big opportunity for organizations to quickly (and effectively) show employees they care. This underlines the need to give managers the autonomy to implement employee engagement strategies, and also give them technology tools that bring the strategies to life.

This survey was commissioned by TINYpulse and conducted by Survata, an independent research firm. Survata interviewed 502 respondents between July 19-20, 2016. Respondents were reached across the Survata publisher network, where they take a survey to unlock premium content, like articles and ebooks.
Part IV: Conclusion

Starting with the question, “Are middle-level managers becoming leaders in employee engagement?” we found that:

- **HIGH FREQUENCY:** A significant portion of TINYpulse administrators are middle-level managers, which shows that there are a good number of managers with a high level of autonomy over employee engagement decisions.

- **MIXED FEELINGS AMONG MANAGERS:** Among middle-level managers we spoke to, opinions vary about the effectiveness and implementation of employee engagement strategies; a few managers feel it is best handled by middle-level managers because they know their employees best, while others may feel that HR or higher levels of leadership should be involved.

- **BENEFITS FOR EMPLOYEES:** In major employee engagement categories – retention, professional development, transparency – employees whose direct managers are involved in engagement strategies appear to be better off.

- **EMPLOYEES WANT MANAGERS TO ACT:** Our polling found that a majority of employees have a direct manager who has implemented employee engagement strategies. And, a majority would want their direct manager to implement employee engagement strategies.

However, we did find that middle-led engagement initiatives have some downsides, such as the lower happiness rating. One other caution: employee engagement activities at the department or team level might undermine the larger engagement efforts of a company.

In a recent white paper on engagement strategy, Robin Erickson, PhD, vice president of talent acquisition, engagement, and retention research at Bersin by Deloitte, Deloitte Consulting LLP, recommends that one of the first steps in designing an employee engagement strategy is to create a definition of engagement for the whole organization.

“Choosing a common language to describe what employee engagement means for your individual organization paves the way to creating a strategy that is truly actionable.”

Once an organization communicates a common understanding of employee engagement, it is less likely that middle-led engagement efforts will be out of step with the larger organization.

Once managers are empowered to implement engagement initiatives complementary to their organization’s larger engagement strategy, the evidence we’ve gathered shows that they have a lot to gain from implementing employee engagement strategies, including lower attrition and more employee excitement about their careers. Middle managers are already leaders in enacting engagement strategies, and there does not appear to be anything from stopping that trend from continuing. It is to their benefit to make sure that their employees are highly engaged, because the loss of just a single employee can be extremely painful for a manager.

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