



WHERE STRATEGY BECOMES ACTION

How Organizations Can Equip Middle Leaders
to Strengthen Execution, Build Trust, and
Navigate Change

Insights from Lisa Rizzo

THE STRATEGY-EXECUTION GAP

Healthcare organizations devote considerable time to setting strategy, defining priorities, and preparing for the future. Yet a strategy does not create change on its own. Its value depends on what happens after the plan leaves the executive level and reaches the teams responsible for putting it into practice.

That is where execution often loses momentum. Middle leaders may receive a decision without enough context about why it was made, what success should look like, or how new priorities should be balanced against existing responsibilities. Goals and reporting expectations may change while the work is already underway. Resources may not match the scale of the request. When employees do not understand the purpose behind a decision, or believe it overlooks operational realities, leaders must spend valuable time resolving confusion and rebuilding commitment.



HEALTHCARE RESEARCH

Research in healthcare supports this view. A study of middle managers responsible for implementing healthcare innovations identified four essential functions: diffusing information, synthesizing information, connecting strategy to day-to-day activity, and encouraging implementation. Participants rated all four roles as extremely important, with information diffusion and synthesis ranked most highly.[2]



Diffusing
information



Synthesizing
information



Connecting
strategy to
day-to-day
activity



Encouraging
implementation

[2] Birken et al., Implementation Science (2016).

THE CONDITIONS FOR EXECUTION

706

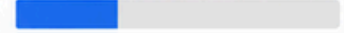
 middle managers

The challenge is not simply whether middle leaders are capable of performing these functions. It is whether organizations create the conditions that allow them to do so. A McKinsey survey of 706 middle managers found that respondents spent nearly half their time on nonmanagerial work and less than one-third on talent and people management. They also reported spending less than one-quarter of their time on strategy-focused work.[3] When the people responsible for translating strategy are consumed by administrative and individual-contributor responsibilities, even a strong plan can stall before it becomes meaningful action.

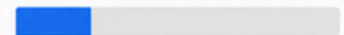
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Less than one-quarter on
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[3] McKinsey Global Survey of 706 middle managers (2023).

“The story behind the numbers is not always black and white. A KPI can show what is happening, but middle leaders are often the people who understand why it is happening.”

LISA RIZZO

THE MIDDLE LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

Middle leaders occupy a distinctive position within an organization. They understand executive priorities, but they also experience how those priorities affect workloads, morale, clients, candidates, patients, and results. This perspective enables them to identify risks early, adapt plans to operational realities, and communicate what employees need in order to move forward. For that position to become a genuine organizational advantage, middle leaders need three things: context, authority, and trust.

THREE CONDITIONS

for credible, decisive execution



01

CONTEXT

Leaders cannot translate a decision they do not fully understand. They need to know why the organization is changing direction, what problem the strategy is intended to solve, what success looks like, and which priorities take precedence when demands compete. Context allows a middle leader to move beyond repeating an announcement. It enables the leader to connect a broad organizational goal to each employee's responsibilities, anticipate questions, explain tradeoffs, and acknowledge what is still being determined. Healthcare implementation research emphasizes this translation role, describing middle managers as the people who make general information relevant to specific teams and connect strategic goals with concrete tasks, tools, and feedback.^[2]



02

AUTHORITY

Execution slows when every operational decision requires multiple levels of approval. Middle leaders should have meaningful decision-making authority within clearly defined financial, ethical, and operational guardrails. Authority does not mean acting without accountability. It means knowing which decisions the leader owns, which require consultation, and which require formal executive approval. This clarity allows decisions closest to the work to be made by leaders who understand the team, the client, the market, and the immediate consequences. McKinsey's research found that insufficient autonomy was among the factors managers identified as negatively affecting their experience, while increased autonomy was the reward respondents most frequently said they wanted.^[3]



03

TRUST

Trust makes honest communication possible in both directions. Employees must be able to ask questions, express concerns, and raise operational risks without assuming that disagreement will be treated as resistance. Middle leaders must also be able to share frontline feedback upward, even when it complicates the original plan. Gallup has reported that managers account for 70 percent of the variance in team engagement, underscoring how strongly employees' experiences are shaped by their direct leaders.^[4] Recent qualitative research on psychological safety also identified communication and transparency, empowerment, mentorship, accountability, and integrity as important leadership behaviors for building stronger team cultures.^[6] Together, context, authority, and trust enable middle leaders to communicate credibly, act decisively, and preserve the relationships that execution depends on.



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THE UNSEEN WEIGHT OF MIDDLE LEADERSHIP

Middle leadership involves far more than managing tasks and monitoring performance. It also requires a significant amount of relational and emotional work that often remains invisible in dashboards, reporting, and organizational charts. Middle leaders are frequently asked to roll out decisions they did not make, answer questions they may not have been prepared to address, and manage the reactions of employees whose work has been directly affected. They absorb pressure from both directions: accountability from senior leadership and understandable concern from the teams responsible for execution.



THE WORK THAT RARELY APPEARS ON A DASHBOARD

TRANSLATE DECISIONS 01

A company-wide message rarely answers every practical question. Middle leaders explain what the decision means for schedules, priorities, client commitments, workflows, and individual expectations. They adjust the message to different roles and motivations without changing its intent.

ABSORB PRESSURE 02

Employees often bring uncertainty and frustration to the leader they know best. That leader must listen with empathy, maintain accountability, and avoid promising outcomes outside their control. At the same time, the leader remains responsible for meeting organizational expectations.

REBUILD TRUST 03

When change is frequent or communication has been inconsistent, middle leaders help restore stability through honest updates, predictable follow-through, recognition, and regular check-ins. This work may not appear on a performance report, but it can determine whether employees remain engaged enough to execute the strategy.

WHY CAPACITY MATTERS

The pressure is growing. Gallup's 2026 workplace research found that global employee engagement declined for a second consecutive year and that falling manager engagement accounted for much of the broader decline.^[5] McKinsey similarly found that only 20 percent of surveyed middle managers strongly agreed that their organizations helped them succeed as people managers.^[3] Organizations should treat the health and capacity of middle leadership as a strategic concern. When these leaders are overloaded, underinformed, or disengaged, the effects do not stop with them. They influence the teams and outcomes for which those leaders are responsible.

"I value being the point person and a cushion for my teams, but that responsibility becomes more difficult when trust or communication is already strained."

LISA RIZZO

LEADING THROUGH CHANGE

Change becomes more credible when employees can see that decisions were made thoughtfully and with understanding of the people affected. Lisa experienced this firsthand when restructuring two recruiting teams. The goal was to align talent with business needs while maintaining appropriate coverage. Rather than treating the exercise as a matter of moving names on an organizational chart, she evaluated individual experience, performance, interests, development opportunities, team strengths, coverage gaps, and client needs. Her approach followed four practical stages:



A FOUR-STAGE APPROACH

Assess. Align. Communicate. Transition.

01

1. ASSESS

Begin with a clear view of the work and the people performing it. Evaluate current responsibilities, demonstrated strengths, development needs, capacity, interests, and operational gaps. Data should inform the assessment, but the discussion should also account for the story behind the numbers.

02

2. ALIGN

Connect people with responsibilities that serve the business while making thoughtful use of their capabilities. Alignment is stronger when it accounts for both current performance and future potential.

03

3. COMMUNICATE

Explain the business rationale, clarify what is changing, and create space for individual questions. Leaders should be candid about what is known, what is still being finalized, and what they cannot control.

04

4. TRANSITION

Support employees as responsibilities shift. Clarify expectations, monitor workload, recognize progress, and revisit the plan when new information emerges.

RESEARCH CONNECTION

This approach is consistent with healthcare implementation research, which found that middle managers adapt initiatives to local conditions, integrate change into workflows, provide practical feedback, and monitor implementation. ^[2] The research also suggests that middle leaders give employees the practical means to carry out change, while senior leaders reinforce its broader importance.

People are more receptive to change when they understand the reasoning and believe their strengths, interests, and concerns were genuinely considered.

LISA RIZZO

HOW EXECUTIVES CAN EMPOWER MIDDLE LEADERS

Execution improves when responsibility is matched with context, authority, time, and support.

Organizations cannot expect middle leaders to take full responsibility for execution while withholding the information, authority, time, and support necessary to succeed. Executive teams can strengthen execution by making five practices part of the way strategy is developed and communicated.

1

1. INVOLVE THEM EARLIER

Invite operational voices into the planning process before decisions are finalized. Middle leaders can identify workflow conflicts, resource gaps, employee concerns, and unintended consequences that may not be visible at the executive level. Not every decision can be collaborative, but earlier input often produces a more executable plan.



2

2. PROVIDE CONTEXT

Explain why the decision is being made, what problem it addresses, what success looks like, and how it connects with other priorities. Advance notice and useful context allow middle leaders to communicate credibly rather than serving as messengers without answers.



3

3. DEFINE AUTHORITY

Establish clear decision rights. Leaders should know what they own, when consultation is expected, and what requires formal approval. Defined guardrails support speed while preserving appropriate oversight.



4

4. LISTEN UPWARD

Create reliable channels for operational feedback and treat that feedback as intelligence, not resistance. Middle leaders are close enough to the work to notice early signs of confusion, capacity constraints, and implementation risk.



5

5. SUPPORT THE MESSAGE

Senior leaders should remain visible when difficult decisions are communicated. Middle leaders should not be left to defend decisions without access to the rationale, resources, or executive reinforcement needed to sustain them.



Research focused on healthcare organizations found that top-management support strengthens middle managers' commitment to implementing innovation^[7]. The World Health Organization similarly identifies strong leadership and good governance as essential to workforce performance.^[8]

WHAT EFFECTIVE MIDDLE LEADERSHIP LOOKS LIKE

The modern middle leader must combine business judgment with human understanding. Technical knowledge and operational discipline matter, but they are not sufficient when teams are navigating uncertainty, changing priorities, distributed work, and different career stages.



01



CLEAR COMMUNICATION

Translate organizational language into specific expectations. Explain what is changing, why it matters, what employees should do next, and how progress will be evaluated.

02



TRUST BUILDING

Follow through consistently, communicate honestly, and acknowledge uncertainty. Trust is strengthened when employees know that their leader will share what is known without pretending to have every answer.

03



EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Recognize how change affects different people and adjust the approach without abandoning accountability. Empathy should deepen a leader's understanding of the situation, not lower the standard for performance.

04



DATA LITERACY

Use KPIs to identify patterns, measure progress, and guide decisions. Then investigate the conditions behind the data, including staffing levels, market changes, process barriers, and employee capacity.

05



ADAPTABILITY

Make thoughtful decisions with incomplete information and revise the approach as circumstances change. Adaptability is especially important when leading remote, hybrid, multigenerational, or geographically distributed teams.

06



ACCOUNTABILITY

Provide real-time feedback, establish clear expectations, and address concerns early. Accountability is most credible when leaders recognize strong performance as consistently as they correct missed expectations.

07



CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Anticipate resistance, clarify priorities, reinforce the purpose of the change, and give employees practical support as new behaviors become part of daily work.

08



INDIVIDUALIZED MOTIVATION

Learn what matters to each employee. Recognition, growth, flexibility, autonomy, compensation, and connection may motivate different people in different ways. Fairness does not always require leading everyone identically.



Recent research on psychologically safe teams reinforces many of these behaviors, including one-on-one relationship building, transparency, opportunities for questions, empowerment, different perspectives, professional development, and consistent accountability.¹



“Use data, but always look for the story behind it.”

LISA RIZZO

TURNING STRATEGY INTO ACTION

Successful execution depends on communication and trust. Middle leaders are the connection between organizational strategy and employees' daily reality. They turn broad goals into priorities, help teams navigate uncertainty, interpret performance in context, surface risks, and maintain forward momentum through change. Their value is especially important in healthcare, where implementation often requires coordination across disciplines, locations, technologies, workflows, and groups with different responsibilities. Research has repeatedly described middle managers as important change agents who connect senior leadership with frontline practice.[2][7]

INVEST DELIBERATELY

- 1  Include middle leaders when their operational perspective can improve a decision.
- 2  Give them enough context to explain the purpose and consequences of the strategy.
- 3  Define authority so decisions can be made close to the work.
- 4  Protect time for coaching, development, and strategic execution.
- 5  Build channels for honest feedback in both directions.
- 6  Support leaders through difficult communications and periods of sustained change.
- 7  Develop future leaders before vacancies or crises force the issue.



Organizations should therefore view middle leadership as a strategic capability, not simply a layer of supervision. That requires deliberate investment: When middle leaders receive context, appropriate authority, and a meaningful voice, they can turn strategy into action while protecting the trust that keeps teams engaged. Without those conditions, even a thoughtful strategy may lose momentum before it reaches the people responsible for carrying it out.

Strong strategy sets the direction.
Empowered middle leaders make progress possible.



ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

PEOPLE
PERSPECTIVE
PROGRESS



LISA RIZZO

VICE PRESIDENT | TANDYM GROUP

Lisa Rizzo is a healthcare staffing leader with extensive experience guiding recruiting teams, navigating organizational change, developing talent, and translating business priorities into meaningful action. Her leadership approach combines data-informed decision-making with clear communication, individual accountability, and a strong understanding of the human experience behind organizational change.

ABOUT TANDYM GROUP

Tandym Group is a national consulting, recruitment, and workforce solutions company committed to helping organizations and professionals move forward. Through specialized industry expertise and relationship-driven service, Tandym partners with employers to address evolving workforce needs and connects professionals with opportunities where they can make an impact.

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