

CREATING NEW MIDDLE MANAGERS

They're essential links in any improvement process.

By H. James Harrington

Top management is essential to getting any improvement process started, but middle management keeps it going. If top managers truly accept their roles as planners and direction-setters, they distance themselves from day-to-day problems facing their businesses, which means its middle managers who actually run their organizations and ensure that they continue to improve. Therefore, the traditional middle-manager role of "kicking tail and taking names" must change drastically. That old micro-management attitude needs to give way to one of macro-management, with its wide viewpoint and understanding of inter-functional relationships. The key tasks for new-generation middle managers are:

- Developing close working relationships with and an understanding of their customers
- Focusing on the big picture *and* managing it
- Providing education, guidance and mentoring to first-line managers
- Focusing on process rather than the actions
- Helping employees learn from failure rather than punishing them for it
- Concentrating on why problems occur rather than who caused them
- Recognizing continuous improvement as well as meeting targets
- Embracing change and acting as change agents
- Rejecting requests to make decisions that should be made at lower levels
- Placing high priorities on networking and similar functions
- Providing role models for first-level managers and employees
- Maintaining honesty
- Sacrificing departmental performance when necessary to improve total organizational performance
- Proactively stimulating upward communication
- Sharing data openly at all levels
- Searching out employees' ideas and actively supporting good ones
- Explaining why an employee's ideas are rejected
- Practicing consensus decision making whenever possible
- Empowering a customer-service employee to resolve customer problems
- Encouraging first-line managers to empower their employees
- Communicating priorities and holding to them

- Establishing networks that identify potential negative trends
- Placing a high priority on problem prevention
- Recognizing and rewarding employees who prevent and solve problems
- Varying the reward process to meet awardees' needs and contribute to the organization's activities
- Treating everyone as equally important
- Demonstrating the importance of meeting schedules and getting the job done without compromising quality
- Handling negative situations with a smile more often than with a frown
- Placing a high priority on expanding employee capabilities and responsibilities. Helping those who request it, if possible
- Above all, being good listeners. Remembering that the same letters spell the words "listen" and "silent"

Middle managers' importance to the improvement process can't be overemphasized. They act as role models for first-level managers and employees. Middle managers shape the management style of the organization's future leaders. They're close enough to employees to be on a first-name basis with all of them. They must understand an individual's performance, strengths and weaknesses as well as his or her career aspirations.

Often, as we develop potential future organizational leaders, they move from one department to another. But middle managers remain the technology and managerial experts to whom new and experienced managers as well as employees all turn. During the improvement process, they're teachers, coaches, friends and mentors. Whereas top management acts as a beacon for the improvement process, middle management provides the rudder. They truly make the difference between excellence and mediocrity.

Middle managers are too often overlooked in our quality processes. We focus on top managers, working with them to get them to change. Then we turn our attention to the employees to help them become part of the team. Often middle managers are left out of the cycle. This is an unforgivable error. Middle managers are typically longtime employees who have given many years to the organization; they're the engines that keep the processes operating.

A key part of any change process is cascading sponsorship. Without a concentrated effort directed at transforming middle management, your TQM or Six Sigma process is doomed to fail. Sure, middle managers will say "yes" when the president asks them to support TQM. But many of them are merely giving lip service to the improvement projects, thinking that they, too, will pass. As a result, black holes can develop throughout an organization that eventually lead to the project's failure.

About the author

H. James Harrington is CEO of the Harrington Institute Inc. and chairman of the board of Harrington Group. He has more than 45 years of experience as a quality professional and is the author of 22 books. Visit his Web site at www.harrington-institute.com.

Reprinted with permission of the author. Originally appears in *Quality Digest*, August 2002, p. 14.