



Advice for Middle Managers on Building a High-Performance Company

Building a high-performance organization isn't solely the responsibility of senior management. Middle managers play a big role in corporate growth as well. *MWorld* asked Dan Coughlin, author of the book *Accelerate*, to share his insights into this role based on the work he has done to help a wide array of FORTUNE 500 managers, as well as executives, fulfill their responsibilities in building their business. Coughlin's firm, The Coughlin Company, Inc., works with corporations to continually increase their rate of sustainable, profitable growth.

Q In building a high-performance organization, is there a role for managers?

The manager's role is the critical role in building a high-performance organization. While senior-level executives establish strategy and clarify the desired business outcomes for the organization, mid-level managers determine the tactics and planned activities that will best support the strategy. They also oversee the function of talent management, involving the attraction, selection, development, and promotion of the talent necessary to successfully execute those tactics.

A "high-performance organization" is one that accelerates the achievement of high-priority business outcomes (HPOs) in a sustainable manner. The manager's greatest contribution is maintaining the focus of his or her employees on doing those things that matter the most to improve those HPOs, and NOT about those that matter the least.

Q Why is it important for managers to acknowledge their leadership responsibilities in this?

To be successful in positively impacting the organization's desired business outcomes, managers must be effective leaders. The ability to lead may not be a part of a manager's title but it is a part of their responsibility. Leadership is the ability to influence how other people think in ways that generate better sustainable results both for the organization and the individuals in it.

Entry-level managers are primarily hired on their technical ability, whether it's in finances, operations, human resources, sales, or marketing. As their responsibilities expand, their technical skills become less important and their ability to influence becomes more important. When you're the VP of Operations for a billion-dollar business unit, you don't need to know every step of every operational process, but you do need to know how to influence people to constantly improve execution of those processes.

Q As a first step, why is self-awareness of their leadership responsibility so important?

My research on managers has included over 3,000 hours of on-site executive coaching where I've had the chance to observe executives and managers in over 20 industries. My biggest

finding in all highly successful managers is their ability to leverage their strengths and passions in ways that generate better sustainable business results.

At one time, I coached three highly successful regional managers who had the same title in the same organization, and each of them was responsible for a different billion-dollar region. Two were women, one was a man; two were white, one was black; two were of average height; one was above average in height; two were in their thirties, one was 48; one was an extraordinary public speaker, one was an amazing empathetic listener, and one developed clear processes for every part of the business. They had nothing in common, except that they each knew their own strengths and passions, which they put into practice as often as they could.

Q You talk about managers reviewing past successes. Why is this so important?

When a manager walks into a room, that manager must believe he or she has a good understanding of the situation and will effectively influence how other people think. Self-confidence is the belief you are going to succeed in an upcoming situation. If the manager doesn't believe he or she is going to help the group succeed, the individual won't be able to effectively create that belief in other people.

One effective way to develop your self-confidence is to recall success stories from your past, regardless of the age or circumstances in which they happened. Answer these questions: What was your goal? What were the obstacles? How did you persevere? How did it feel when you achieved the goal? What lessons did you learn from going through that experience?

By reviewing a past success, you will walk into your current challenge with the mindset that you've been here before and can do this again.

Q Why is it also important to review failures?

When a manager succeeds, too often the person wants to move too quickly into celebration mode. When a manager fails, too often he or she wants to move too quickly into depression. Neither action is very effective.

Dissect your failures, and your successes, by asking these questions: What was your original goal? What did you achieve? What did you do to try to achieve your goal? What worked well? What did not work well? What did you learn? What will you do the same next time? What will you do differently?

By stepping off the train of constant activity and frequently analyzing the activities of your group, you can steadily improve future decisions and levels of execution.

Q How should managers go about previewing their future successes?

Take out a blank sheet of paper and answer these questions: What is your desired outcome? What strengths do you have that can be applied successfully? What obstacles do you need to overcome? How will you persevere? What lessons from past experiences do you need to apply in this situation to be successful?

First, a manager should do this by himself or herself. Then the manager should include members of his or her team in answering these questions, followed by discussing the

answers as a group. In doing so, the group gets a handle on what needs to happen to generate success.

Q Is only their lack of confidence what holds managers back from contributing to corporate growth? How much is it due to their own expectations? What about the organization's expectations of managers?

Self-confidence is an important factor in managerial success, but certainly not the only factor. Self-discipline, which is the ability to do what you said you would do, is another important factor. So is communicating with clarity, candor, and respect. While there are many more important factors, one that oftentimes gets overlooked is the manager's capacity to fail. When a manager worries about failing, for fear of loss of job or lifestyle, he or she becomes trapped in the cage of mediocrity.

Expectations, both those of the manager and those placed on the manager, play an important role in accelerating corporate growth. If a manager's boss is filling up his or her schedule with meetings and activities that don't significantly impact the organization's HPOs, then the boss hurts corporate growth. On the other hand, if the manager expects himself or herself to be at every group meeting, then he or she is not leveraging time, strengths, or passions very effectively.

Q What managerial skills are critical to the manager's contribution to a high-performance organization?

Aside from what I've said earlier, I believe two critical management skills are, first, using thinking time and, second, saying no.

Schedule one hour a week on your calendar where you will get away from your office, employees, customers, suppliers, home, and family. Make that meeting with yourself as important as any other.

When you get there, take out a sheet of paper and write down ONE important objective you want to improve. Turn that objective into an open-ended question and for 45 minutes answer it from a variety of perspectives including yours, your boss's, your employees', your competitors', and your customers'. During the last 15 minutes, combine your answers to make even better ones, select your best idea, and develop an action plan. Then move back into action.

BMW has this magnificent ad that says, "NO" in big letters above the picture of a beautiful BMW car. In the small print it says something like, "BMW says no to a lot of good ideas so it can say yes to a few great ideas." That's great advice. The best managers generate a lot of ideas, say no to the good ideas, and save the group's energy and time to execute the great ideas. Great ideas are the ones that steadily move the business forward.

Q How can you communicate and get buy-in to the changes you think will influence growth?

Essentially, you're talking about leadership. I'm a big fan of the Socratic method in which the manager uses a series of open-ended questions to guide the conversation, even with senior-level executives.

Say the manager wants to expand his number of employees by 10%. I suggest he go into meetings with his boss, his peers, and his current employees with open-ended questions and an open mind. He may come to find that expanding his workforce by 10% is not the best answer. During the discussion, he could offer his idea of adding 10% more employees to the other ideas and then see whether or not the idea gains momentum. He could then use analogies, statistics, stories, and further open-ended questions to support his idea.

Q How can you clarify your priorities and build your schedule around them?

As a manager, you can establish your priority outcomes and activities in five steps. First, identify your organization's stated priorities for this fiscal year and for the next three years. Second, meet with your boss and ask her what the top three desired outcomes are for this year. Third, identify the three outcomes you can impact that fall under both the umbrella of your boss's desired outcomes and your organization's desired outcomes.

Now, step four, take the most desired outcome you want to improve and write down the two things you can do that would have the greatest positive impact on improving that outcome. Then repeat that step for your other two top priority outcomes. You now have six actions to do. Put those six activities on your calendar first. Schedule them when you have your best energy. Build in extra time on both sides of those six activities. Those are the activities that will accelerate your business and your career. [MW](#)

Accelerate by Dan Coughlin is newly published by Kaplan Publishing, New York City.



Improve your job performance with recommendations and resources to keep you informed and on top of your career game.

SUBSCRIBE TODAY!

Keep Your Career Growing with... **AMA's Free e-Newsletters and Online Library Access**

- Articles with real-life applications. Smart solutions, expert advice and news you can use right now.
- Quick reads. Gain valuable insights and learn something new in just a few minutes.
- Take-away tips and tools. Book chapters, quizzes, how-tos, self-assessments and more...our best content is yours, **FREE** with access to AMA's online library.
- **Moving Ahead**
Our premier e-newsletter packed with ideas and insights for business success
- **Leader's Edge**
Tools for motivating and inspiring teams and organizations. Insights for leaders at all levels.
- **Administrative Excellence**
Resources for achieving work and life goals for today's administrative professionals.
- **Performance and Profits**
A corporate perspective on management and leadership development for business results.

>> www.amatraining.org/enewsletters