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Are you a mid-level leader, manager, or supervisor in your organization and feel like you’re constantly caught in the middle? Are you responsible for providing leadership to others despite any restrictions imposed on you by your boss or top leader?

One of the toughest things about being a leader in the middle of an organization is that you can’t always be sure where you stand. As a leader, you have some power and authority. You can make some decisions. You have access to some resources. You can call the people in your area to action and direct them in their work. At the same time, you also lack power in other areas. And if you overstep your authority, you can get yourself into real trouble.

As a leader in the middle of an organization, the authority you do possess is not your own. Unless you are the owner or CEO of the company, the power you have is on loan from someone with higher authority. And that person has the power to take that authority away from you by firing you, demoting you, or moving you to another area of the business.

The degree of tension commonly felt by middle leaders is not equal. Some organizations empower their middle leaders more or less. Some allow middle leaders much latitude on taking initiative while others don’t.

Additionally, each corporation or organization has a unique environment with its own unique leadership DNA. If you have a military background, you can’t walk into your civilian workplace and expect it to function like a military unit. If the majority of your experience is with large corporations, and you go to

work for a mom-and-pop business, you will have problems if you don’t adapt.

Mid-level leaders have varying degrees of technical knowledge and expertise. Newly appointed leaders may feel higher tension than longer tenured leaders who have had more time to learn, observe, and understand. This type of tension can be reduced over time, but it will be very stressful in the meantime.

Leading from the middle also means you most likely are not going to get as much public recognition and appreciation as leaders at the top. The greater your desire to receive credit and recognition, the more frustrated you are likely to become working in the middle of the organization.

But you are not doomed! It’s not enough to merely recognize that leading from the middle can be stressful. It’s not good enough to simply survive. You want to thrive, and to do that, you need to learn how to relieve the tension. Here are five suggestions:

1) *Become comfortable with the middle.* Comfort is really a function of expectations. The wider the gap between what you imagine to be and reality, the more disappointed you are likely to be. So reduce this gap! Talk things out with your boss. The more you know about what’s expected of you, what’s normal in the organization, and how much authority you have, the more comfortable you will be.

2) *Know what to “own” and what to “let go.”* Nothing frees a person from tension like clear lines of responsibility. Learn to ask, “Is this mine or yours?”

3) *Find quick access to answers.* When you can’t wait for that uncommunicative boss to get back to you, find others who can help you. Maybe it’s a secretary or assistant, or

maybe it’s an engineer or other type of specialist who has the knowledge or experience you need and can share it with you. This is why it is important to have good rapport with the people around you.

4) *Never violate your position or the trust of the leader.* If you want to know what will increase your tension to the breaking point, it’s violating the trust given to you with your authority or position. That can mean abusing the power of your position, intentionally undermining your leader, or using the organization’s resources for personal gain. Your ability to sustain your authority is entirely dependent upon your faithfulness in serving the people who gave you that authority. Accordingly, you must guard against the temptation to try to advance at the expense of your leader. And it would be wise to not allow yourself to have an “if I were in charge” conversation with another staff member. If you have difficulties with your leaders, talk to them about it.

5) *Find a way to relieve stress.* Hit golf balls, jog, take up kickboxing, do aerobics, take a walk, get a massage--it doesn’t matter what, as long as it is a good, healthy outlet for when stress and tension get to be too much for you.

Leading from the middle of an organization is stressful, but so is being the top leader. And so is being a worker who has no say in how his or her job should be done. The key to succeeding is to learn to deal with the tension of whatever position you are in, overcome its obstacles, and make the most of its advantages and opportunities. If you do that, you can succeed from anywhere in the organization.

~ The End ~