Organisations’ middle managers perform two critical roles: delivering ‘business as usual’, and transforming strategic aspirations into operational change. So it’s vital that those managers are energised and engaged. But perversely, the very duality of the role that middle managers must play can have the opposite effect through the tensions that are created.

Based on in-depth interviews and analyses of 34 real-life middle managers and the groups for which they are responsible, research undertaken by the Henley Forum shows that, while middle managers’ personal orientations can result in vastly different performances in achieving effective organisational change, understanding these differences provides a basis for developing their capabilities so they can become self-confident leaders with a voice that is heard.
Energetic middle managers are the heart of successful change and are pivotal in helping organisations to realise ambitious strategic goals and requirements.

But it’s a role with inherent tensions: at the same time as co-ordinating essential tangible and intangible resources to maintain business as usual, they must translate a broad strategic change agenda into a working reality, by establishing future ways of working.

So full engagement is vital. Because if middle managers don’t engage with what is being asked of them, they become a major obstacle to the organisation’s success, as they are leading and co-ordinating the essential operational activities that deliver this success.

Prompted by the concerns of a member organisation about how best to achieve this engagement, the Henley Forum analysed the engagement and energy levels of 34 real-life middle managers and their teams by drawing on previous research that showed how to map team ‘energy profiles’ and middle managers’ own orientations to the demands placed on them. The Henley research resulted in a coaching framework to develop middle managers’ capabilities to deal with these tensions.

Becoming aware of the association between specific middle managers’ own orientations and team energy profiles means that individual managers and their organisations can then work to develop and reinforce skills and behaviours – energising middle managers to perform at their best, both operationally and as change agents.

Squeezed and stretched
An energetic middle manager is an engaged middle manager. In 1990, Kahn suggested that, from a psychological perspective, engagement depends on three things: ‘meaningfulness’, ‘safety’, and ‘availability’.

Meaningfulness is the sense of getting some return for investing one’s physical, cognitive or emotional energy, because it is clear why putting continued effort into tasks, roles and relationships actually matters. Safety, meanwhile, is the sense of being able to show and act as oneself, free from fear of negative or damaging consequences to self-image, status or career. Finally, availability is the extent to which an individual possesses the necessary emotional, behavioural, or mental resources to cope with what is being asked of them. While all three factors have a significant influence on engagement, meaningfulness contributes most to engagement.

But for middle managers, that meaningfulness – the sense of being in a role that makes a genuine difference – is impacted by the very nature of that role and its dualities. Simply put, middle managers face in two directions: they have to see the big picture, but manage the detail. And this in turn creates some inevitable personal tensions. In addition to dealing with the usual pressures of tight budgets, shortages of time and people, political issues, unclear priorities, and possibly worries over job security, middle managers must:

• Maintain their personal credibility and the trust of their team in an environment often characterised by uncertainty and ambiguous messages, while also sustaining a sound reputation for delivery with senior managers.

• Rely on their own and their team’s existing knowledge, while also exploring and learning new skills and new ways of working.

• Create the necessary sense of stability and continuity to give people confidence that they can perform, while also possessing the energy and drive to do things differently.

• Work through existing routines, behaviours, and networks while also setting up new ones.

Put another way, this combination of organisational pressures and role dualities acts to both squeeze and stretch middle managers at the same time – and, not surprisingly, they end up...
developing coping strategies to deal with these tensions. The combination of being simultaneously squeezed and stretched can affect middle managers’ sense of identity within the organisation, for instance, which can act as a drain on the amount of energy that they have available, or are willing to exert.

And if middle managers experience demands on their personal resources and energy in excess of the amount that they have available, research elsewhere suggests that the ensuing tensions will limit the breadth of their thinking and the repertoire of actions that they are capable of delivering. Consequently, it’s not a stretch to imagine that this in turn will affect their capacity to successfully lead their teams – adversely impacting those teams’ ability to deliver.

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**Critical capabilities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical capabilities</th>
<th>Where am I?</th>
<th>Where do I need to be?</th>
<th>What could I do or change to close the gap?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communicating effectively, which means transmitting messages, translating expectations for the team, and being an interface between top and bottom.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maintaining order and stability to deliver business as usual by policing existing policies and procedures, and defending the team's capacity to act.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developing people and helping them perform by magically solving problems, building their skills, stirring up the different team ingredients into an appetising mix, and being an influential role model and coach.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developing and managing working relationships with other parts of the organisation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being a change agent – like an intelligent machine, monitoring financial improvements, providing authoritative direction and expertise, and working out how to transform activities to operate effectively in new configurations.</td>
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</table>

**Understanding middle managers’ orientations**

The Henley Forum research used the energy questionnaire developed by Bruch and Vogel (published in *Fully Charged: How Great Leaders Boost their Organization's Energy and Ignite High Performance*, HBS Publishing) to map the relative proportion of ‘productive’, ‘comfortable’, ‘resigned’, and ‘corrosive’ energy that each of 34 managers believed was present in their teams. Combining these results with interviews with these same managers allowed the Henley researchers to better understand the ways middle managers conceive of themselves in relation to the requirements of managing their group and fulfilling their role.

**Developing middle managers’ capabilities**

Clearly it is in the interests of organisations to develop managers running teams in the less productive categories of energy and help them move towards the profile of self-confident leaders who feel they have a voice that is heard.

Understanding these orientations and exploring managers’ perceptions and roles led to the development of a coaching framework to develop middle managers’ capability to cope with the contradictory demands that they face. This can be used to structure reflection by the managers themselves or as a coaching framework within the organisation.

**Middle manager orientation to the requirements of their role**

- **A self-confident leader with a voice that is heard**
  - High on productive energy
- **An officer responsible for delivering results**
  - High on productive and comfortable energy
- **A team player who engages with the familiar and the known**
  - High on comfortable energy
- **Ambivalent about their position and feeling conflicted and vulnerable**
  - Turbulent: high on all four energy categories
- **Emotionally exhausted by the uncertainty and the volume and nature of demands**
  - High on resigned energy
- **Fish out of water, struggling to survive**
  - High on corrosive energy

**Group energy profile**

- **High on productive energy only**
- **High on productive and comfortable energy**
- **High on comfortable energy only**
- **High on resigned energy**
- **High on corrosive energy**

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