



# THE TOP 10 THINGS

Middle Managers Desperately  
Need (But Are Afraid to Ask For)

A Report from Simon Sinek's **Optimism@Work**

Based on comprehensive research from nearly a thousand middle managers and evidence-based organizational psychology



**Tracy has been working in accounting at a mid-sized company for three years. She was recently promoted to manage a team of 8 people. Ask any of her leaders and they will tell you that it was because of her performance that she earned her promotion. She's great with numbers, so naturally, she'd be great with humans, right? Wrong.**

Tracy is now struggling. She's juggling budget reports, performance reviews, strategic planning meetings, and trying to figure out why Jake seems disengaged while Maria is obviously overwhelmed but won't admit it.

Sadly, Tracy's case is more common than most companies would like to admit. In fact, **75% of middle managers are experiencing burnout<sup>1</sup>**, making them the most stressed level in the organization. They're spending only **41% of their time on actual people management**, with the rest consumed by administrative tasks that could be handled by a well-trained spreadsheet.<sup>2</sup>

The pandemic didn't create this crisis, but it turned up the volume on problems that were already there. **Now 82% of middle managers serve as cultural ambassadors** in virtual environments, responsible for maintaining organizational cohesion across distributed teams.<sup>3</sup> They've become technology coordinators, mental health supporters, and performance translators—roles they weren't hired to do and certainly haven't been trained for.

**The financial impact is staggering: organizations lose \$15.4 billion annually** due to middle manager turnover and burnout, with replacement costs reaching 200% of departing managers' salaries.

But the opposite is also true. **Organizations with strong middle management see 3-21 times higher returns!** When middle managers are treated like another cost to manage or a source of frustration, the people and the organization will suffer. However, when companies view middle managers as a worthwhile investment, the impact can lift an entire organization.

We recently polled 971 middle managers in scores of industries around the world and analyzed their responses and what the data revealed is both heartbreaking and hopeful. It's worth noting that the data represents more than statistics. The data is telling us a story about our colleagues, our friends...maybe even us. It's a story about a group of people caught between the ambitions of becoming senior leaders and the daily reality of getting stuff done with actual humans. And doing it all with very little training or support from the companies they work for.

And that stress takes a toll. The number one challenge that middle managers report struggling with is not burnout, it's a lack of self-confidence. Nearly a third of all people in leadership positions feel fundamentally unsure of themselves. And over 40% are desperately seeking help to find their professional purpose. They're not just going through the motions. They're actively seeking meaning in a role that often feels thankless.

Despite the stress, there is also a reason to be hopeful: those in middle management positions are not giving up. They're asking for help, for growth, for something better. And there is some good research to show us exactly what they need and how to give it to them.

# Key stats from this report



## Confidence Crisis

Middle managers report that self-confidence is their #1 challenge AND their #1 goal, simultaneously.



## Purpose Hunger

3 out of 4 middle managers want help finding their professional WHY.



## Leadership Gap

55% of middle managers actively struggle with basic leadership skills, including effective communication.



## Flight Risk

27.2% of middle managers are actively working on their exit strategy.



## Workplace Disconnection

Nearly half of all middle managers (43.2%) are fundamentally disconnected from work: 23.6% feel uninspired, 10.8% actively dislike the culture, and 8.8% are dealing with interpersonal conflicts.



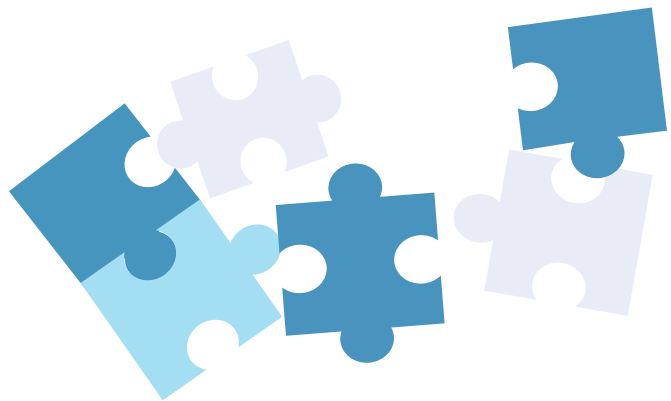
## Remote Work Struggles

43.4% are currently hybrid workers and struggle with virtual leadership challenges.

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# 1. Permission to Not Have All the Answers (And a Safe Place to Admit It)

**What's Happening:** Managers are terrified of looking incompetent, so they're pretending to know things they don't and making decisions without the support they need.

**The Data Proves It:** "Build up my confidence" ranks as the #1 challenge for middle managers, with 27.2% identifying this as their most critical need.

**The Solution:** Psychological safety to admit challenges and seek help. Less "figure it out" culture, more "let's figure it out together" culture.

**One Thing That Can Be Done Tomorrow:** Managers need to hear this message from their leaders: *"I'm wondering if we've failed you somehow. What support do you need that you haven't felt comfortable asking for?"*

When leaders take accountability for a situation it helps to flip the script from shame to safety, positioning the organization as potentially at fault rather than the individual manager. When leaders model vulnerability by admitting they might have "failed," it gives managers explicit permission to be human too, treating the confidence crisis as a systems problem rather than a personal failing.



# 2. Someone to Help Them Find Their Professional North Star

**What This Really Means:** Three-quarters of middle managers don't know why they're doing what they're doing beyond "because it's my job."

**The Data Proves It:** 40.4% of all middle managers desperately need help finding their professional purpose, with another 34.6% curious but cautious about exploring this.

**The Solution:** Purpose isn't a luxury—it's rocket fuel. Help them connect their daily work to something bigger than themselves.

**Try This Tomorrow:** Managers need to hear: *"Tell me a specific story from your professional career when you LOVED what you were doing. It can be big or small, commercially successful or not. But you LOVED it and if all your days or projects were like this one, you'd have the best job in the world."*

Though some think this is just "feel-good fluff," they are wrong. When we can tap into these memories, there is always an insight contained within those stories - a reason why we chose that story over all the others. It is that insight that signals that there is a good reason to wake up and come to work the next day and put up with all the insanity beyond the metrics, deadlines and results. And in nearly every single case, that story is something to do with people or impact and not products or services.

**The Evidence:** Johnson & Johnson achieved a **20% increase in leadership engagement scores** over three years through their comprehensive leadership development initiative focusing on emotional intelligence and purpose alignment.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Training That Actually Prepares Them for the Human Parts of Leadership

**What This Really Means:** We're promoting people based on technical skills and hoping they'll magically develop people skills through osmosis.

**The Data Proves It:** More than half of middle managers (54.7%) are actively struggling with fundamental leadership capabilities, including basic communication skills.

**The Solution:** We have to train for the stuff that keeps us awake at 2 AM: How to tell someone they've made a mistake without destroying their soul. How to motivate a team member who's clearly given up. How to celebrate wins without looking fake. How to disagree with our boss in a way that doesn't feel like career suicide.

**Try This Tomorrow:** Replace generic leadership training with peer learning circles where managers can admit "I have no idea what I'm doing" and get real help. Microsoft's Learning Circles program exploded across divisions because managers finally had a place to ask questions like "How do I tell someone their presentation style is killing team morale?" without looking incompetent.<sup>8</sup>

**The Evidence:** Studies show that coaching programs alone can deliver **529-788% ROI**, but effectiveness increases from 22% to 88% when training is combined with ongoing coaching support.<sup>7</sup>

### 4. Time to Actually Manage People (Not Spreadsheets)

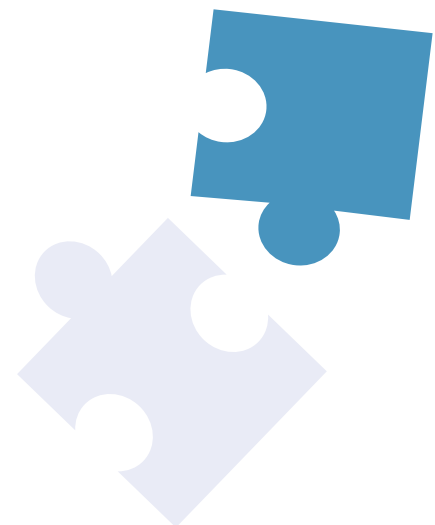
**What This Really Means:** We're asking them to be managers while giving them the time budget of an individual contributor with administrative duties.

**The Data Proves It:** Middle managers spend only 41% of their time on actual people management. Meanwhile, the single biggest factor they consider "holding them back" in their career is "my team."

**The Solution:** Time optimization and role clarity. Right-size manager-to-employee ratios while eliminating administrative burdens that don't require management expertise.

**Try This Tomorrow:** Conduct a time audit with managers. Ask them to track their time for one week, then ruthlessly eliminate anything that could be automated, delegated, or eliminated entirely.

**The Evidence:** Organizations following McKinsey's "Power to the Middle" framework—which includes optimizing spans and resetting manager roles—report significant improvements in both manager satisfaction and business outcomes.<sup>9</sup>



## 5. A Roadmap for Career Growth

**What This Really Means:** Managers don't see a future at our companies. They're planning their escape because we haven't shown them a clear path forward internally.

**The Data Proves It:** While we're focused on retention, 27.2% of middle managers are actively working on their exit strategy, making "better positioning for promotion or a new job" the overwhelming #1 priority in their career.

**The Solution:** Transparent career progression with concrete milestones. Not vague promises about "growth opportunities," but actual roadmaps showing how someone gets from where they are to where they want to be, with timelines, requirements, and examples.

**Try This Tomorrow:** Map out 3-5 realistic next steps for each manager and share it with them. Include specific skills to develop, projects to lead, and approximate timelines. When people can see their future at your company, they stop planning their future elsewhere.

**The Evidence:** Companies that create clear advancement pathways see **40% higher retention rates** among high-potential managers.<sup>10</sup>

## 6. Tools to Handle the Emotional Labor of Management

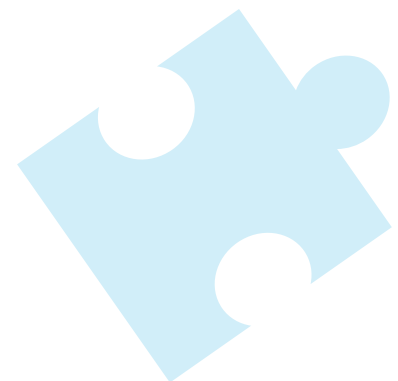
**What This Really Means:** They're absorbing stress from above and below while managing their own emotional overwhelm.

**The Data Proves It:** Nearly half of all middle managers (43.2%) are fundamentally disconnected from work: 23.6% feel uninspired, 10.8% actively dislike the culture, and 8.8% are dealing with interpersonal conflicts.

**The Solution:** Emotional intelligence training and stress management systems that go beyond "take a deep breath."

**Try This Tomorrow:** Create a "panic button" system. Give managers permission to send a standing email when overwhelmed: *"I'm hitting my panic button. Need 24 hours to reset."* Reply back: *"Panic button received. Take the time you need. We've got your back."*

**The Evidence:** Gallup research shows that **managers account for 70% of variance in employee engagement<sup>11</sup>**, meaning uninspired managers create uninspired teams in a cascading effect throughout the organization.





## 7. Support for Leading Hybrid Teams Without Losing Their Minds

**What This Really Means:** They're trying to maintain culture, performance, and relationships through Zoom screens while fighting "productivity paranoia."

**The Data Proves It:** 43.4% currently work hybrid and struggle with virtual leadership challenges.

**What They Need:** New frameworks for virtual leadership that don't rely on surveillance or traditional oversight methods.

**Try This Tomorrow:** Replace "management by walking around" with "management by checking in." Train managers to have more frequent, shorter, purpose-driven conversations rather than trying to recreate in-person management virtually.

**The Evidence:** Research shows that remote employees who received regular constructive feedback from their manager were **2.5 times more engaged** than employees who did not regularly receive feedback, while 80% of employees who receive meaningful feedback are more likely to be fully engaged.<sup>12</sup>

## 8. Recognition That Actually Makes People Feel Valued

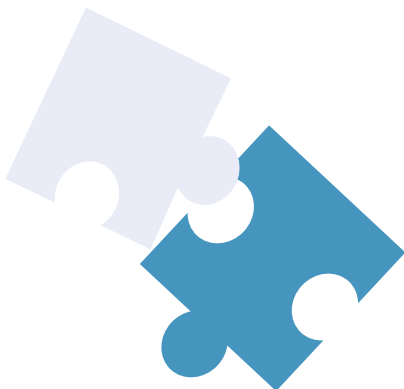
**What This Really Means:** The people responsible for motivating others have completely lost motivation themselves. They're stuck in roles that feel meaningless, which makes it impossible for them to inspire their teams.

**The Data Proves It:** Middle managers are the most miserable people at work. In our data, they report the lowest job satisfaction rates across all levels of corporate life, with 20.7% feeling completely purposeless.

**The Solution:** A clear connection between their daily work and bigger picture.

**Try This Tomorrow:** Ask each middle manager: "What impact do you think your work has on the company's mission?" If they can't answer or only mention operational tasks, you've found the problem. Help them identify and articulate the bigger purpose behind their role.

**The Evidence:** Organizations that position middle management as a **prestigious career destination** rather than just a stepping stone see dramatically better retention and performance.<sup>13</sup>



## 9. Job Descriptions That Match Their Natural Strengths

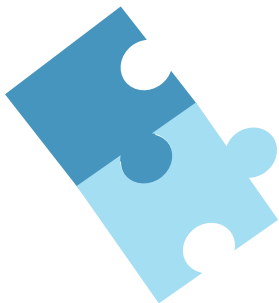
**What This Really Means:** Managers are not playing to their strengths. They see themselves as coaches and relationship-builders, but job descriptions, performance metrics, and daily reality force them into task-masters.

**The Data Proves It:** Most middle managers describe themselves as The Diplomat (“I want everyone to be happy!”) (28.2%) and The Reporter (“I’m always asking questions!”) (27.3%). These are both people-focused roles.

**What They Need:** Organizations that match their identity with their actual role. Stop measuring them on spreadsheets and start measuring them on people development. Let Diplomats build relationships and Reporters ask insightful questions.

**Try This Tomorrow:** Rewrite one middle manager’s job description to match their natural personality type. If they’re a self-described Diplomat, make “team harmony and conflict resolution” 40% of their role, not 4%. Watch what happens to their team’s performance.

**The Evidence:** Research confirms that **person-job fit has a significant positive effect** on employee outcome variables such as job performance and organizational commitment, while alignment of interests and careers results in increased career satisfaction and job performance.<sup>14</sup>



## 10. Mentorship and Development That Actually Develops Them

**What This Really Means:** We’ve promoted them into complex leadership roles and then abandoned them to figure it out alone. They’re managing people without anyone managing their growth.

**The Data Proves It:** Nearly 1 in 5 middle managers (17.9%) identify “inadequate support or mentoring” as the primary barrier holding back their careers, the highest-ranking external obstacle they face.

**The Solution:** Real mentorship programs that go beyond quarterly check-ins. Pair them with senior leaders who actually invest time in their development, not just performance reviews. Give them access to external coaching, peer learning groups, and structured leadership development paths.

**Try This Tomorrow:** Identify one senior leader and ask them to mentor a middle manager for 6 months—not supervise them, mentor them. One hour every two weeks focused purely on their growth, challenges, and career development. Watch how both their confidence and performance transform.

**The Evidence:** The most effective programs span 6-24 months and include multiple touchpoints. A multinational financial services company saw **93% of participants highly recommend** their 10-month capability-building program, which produced more than 20 new value-creating initiatives.<sup>15</sup>

## THE BOTTOM LINE

# This Is About More Than Management

**Middle managers aren't just asking for help with their jobs. They're asking for help becoming the leaders our organizations need them to be.**

**They want to matter. They want to grow. They want to make a difference.**

The data shows they're struggling, but it also shows they're resilient, committed, and hungry for development. 40% are desperately seeking purpose. 27% want career advancement. 22% want to level up their leadership skills.

The organizations that recognize this moment as an opportunity rather than a crisis will be the ones that emerge stronger. Because when we have confident, purpose-driven, well-supported middle managers, everything else gets easier.

Strategy gets implemented better. Culture gets stronger. People stay longer. Results improve dramatically.

This isn't just about fixing a problem—it's about unlocking the potential that's already there, waiting for someone to notice and nurture it.



# What's Next?

This transformation is complex, and we don't have to figure it out alone. At Optimism at Work, we help people communicate better, work better, and lead better, all based on Simon Sinek's proven teachings.

## HERE'S HOW WE CAN HELP

- **The Leadership Accelerator Package**

Our signature program that transforms middle managers into confident, effective leaders through a mix of on-demand lessons and live workshops

- **“Leading Through Uncertainty” Packages**

Specialized programs designed for teams navigating constant change and chaos

- **Custom Leadership Workshops**

Tailored solutions that address your specific middle management challenges

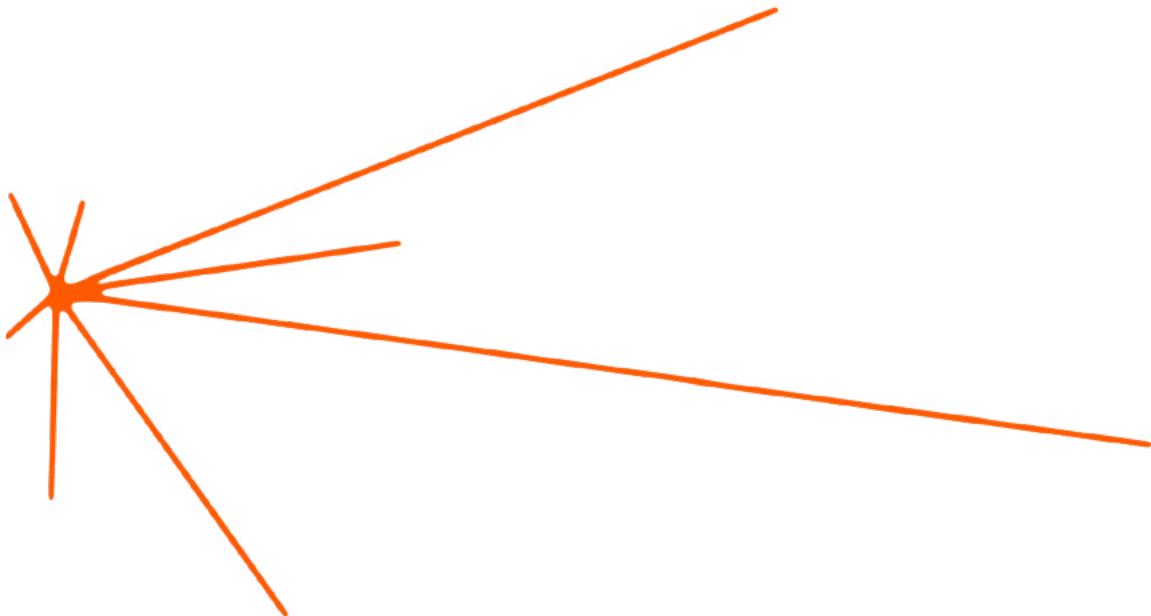
- **Optimism Library Subscriptions**

Give your managers access to Simon's comprehensive learning platform for self-paced development.

We help leaders find their WHY, build psychological safety, and develop the infinite mindset needed to thrive in uncertainty.

## Ready to start?

Let's talk: <https://business.simonsinek.com/contact-us/>



# More on Our Data

## 971 Middle Managers: Who They Are & What They're Struggling With

### DEMOGRAPHICS

#### Gender Breakdown

**Female:** 566 people (58.3%)  
**Male:** 387 people (39.9%)  
**Prefer not to answer:** 13 people (1.3%)  
**Non-Binary:** 4 people (0.4%)

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### WORK ARRANGEMENTS

#### Current Setup

**Hybrid:** 410 people (42.2%)  
**100% in-office:** 363 people (37.4%)  
**100% remote:** 197 people (20.3%)

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### WHAT THEY ACTUALLY WANT

**Hybrid:** 605 people (62.3%) +20%  
**100% in-office:** 216 people (22.2%) -15%  
**100% remote:** 149 people (15.3%) -5%

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### WHAT THEY'RE FOCUSED ON

#### Top 3 Primary Goals at Work

**"Be better positioned for a promotion or new job"** - 264 people (27.2%)

**"Level up my leadership skills"** - 211 people (21.7%)

**"Become a better communicator"** - 179 people (18.4%)

### TOP 3 MOST URGENT CHALLENGES

**"Build up my confidence"** - 264 people (27.2%)

**"I'm not inspired at work"** - 229 people (23.6%)

**"I got a promotion and need to up my leadership skills"** - 142 people (14.6%)

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### THE PURPOSE CRISIS

**"Are you interested in knowing your WHY?"**

**"PLEASE HELP! I NEED THIS!"** - 392 people (40.4%)

**"Perhaps...tell me more first..."** - 336 people (34.6%)

**"My Why is clear and I'm on my journey"** - 204 people (21.0%)

**"Meh"** - 39 people (4.0%)

75% of middle managers are either desperately seeking purpose or curious about finding it.

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