

# BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

And Other Joys of Working in the Middle  
by Barry Oshry



Power  Systems

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# PROLOGUE

**SHE**, a sprite with uncanny wisdom about organizational life, counsels a torn Middle on the edge of breakdown.



*"Oh my, this is not looking good."*

*(This Prologue is modified from Act II, Scene 1 of "What a Way to Make a Living" by the author.)*

**SHE** has been sitting in a corner of Middle's office observing her deal with a series of phone calls. Each call ends with Middle weakly whispering into the phone, "I'll see what I can do." Middle slumps on her desk as **SHE** speaks.



**SHE:** You O.K.?

**MIDDLE:** I used to be.

**SHE:** You used to be?

**MIDDLE:** Uh huh, I used to be O.K. I used to be strong... confident... competent. That's why they made me a middle manager.  
*(The phone rings.)*

**SHE:** Excuse me.  
*(Picks up the phone, listens, then says weakly.)*  
I'll see what I can do. *(Hangs up the phone.)*

**MIDDLE:** *(Is puzzled but continues)* You used to be O.K. And now?

**SHE:** Now I'm a mess.

**MIDDLE:** A mess?

**MIDDLE:** A mess. Weak. Nothing I do is good enough. No one respects me...  
*(Plaintive)* No one likes me. I can't blame them. I try and try and try,  
but the harder I try, the worse it gets. Can't please anyone. I'm a total  
incompetent. Ask anybody. It's my brain. I've heard about such things.  
I just never thought it would happen to me - so young.

**SHE:** *(Incredulous)* You sure it's your brain?

**MIDDLE:** I've tried everything else. I jog...I meditate...I chant...I eat nothing but  
grains and green tea...I take pills to calm me down...and pills to pep  
me up...*(Confidentially)* I'm in therapy. *(Shakes her head.)* Nothing  
helps. What else can it be? It's my brain. It's shrinking. *(Sinks back  
into her total despair position -- hunched over, head in hands, moan-  
ing. The phone rings. She picks it up, listens, and says weakly)* I'll see  
what I can do. *(Hangs up.)*

**SHE:** Who was that?

**MIDDLE:** *(Gestures upward)* My Top.

**SHE:** What does he want?

**MIDDLE:** He's looking to me for more production. *(The phone rings. She picks it  
up, listens. Says weakly)* I'll see what I can do. *(Hangs up.)*

**SHE:** And that?

**MIDDLE:** A Customer. Quality's not good enough.  
*(CLERK rushes in with a note. MIDDLE reads it.)*  
I'll see what I can do.  
*(CLERK gives MIDDLE a derisive look and leaves.)*

**SHE:** What was that about?



**MIDDLE:** I promised the workers a new piece of equipment and it hasn't come in yet. Any minute I'll be hearing from Suppliers complaining that...

**SHE:** Let's see if I have the picture. Your Top wants more productivity, right?

**MIDDLE:** Right.

**SHE:** So why aren't you producing more?

**MIDDLE:** *(Laughs)* Me? I don't produce. It's the workers who produce.

**SHE:** I see. And the workers are complaining about not having the new equipment. Right?

**MIDDLE:** Right.

**SHE:** So why don't you give them the new equipment?

**MIDDLE:** I don't have the equipment. The Tops decided to wait until next year. Budgetary issues.

**SHE:** I see. And the customers are complaining about quality. Right?

**MIDDLE:** You got it.

**SHE:** So why don't you give them a better quality product?

**MIDDLE:** But I don't make the product.

**SHE:** Aren't you beginning to see something here? A pattern?

**MIDDLE:** I sure do. I see that I'm letting *everyone* down.

**SHE:** Look a little closer.

**MIDDLE:** I just can't cut it anymore. I'm incompetent. I'm a weak manager. Is that what you mean?

**SHE:** No. Listen. Everyone wants something from you that you don't have.

**MIDDLE:** Absolutely. I'm letting them all down.

**SHE:** You're missing the point. The Tops want productivity, but you don't do productivity; the Workers do.

**MIDDLE:** Uh huh.

**SHE:** The Workers want the new equipment, but you don't control the new equipment; the Tops do.

**MIDDLE:** Uh huh.

**SHE:** The Customers are looking to you for quality, but you don't do quality...

**MIDDLE:** Yeh, yeh, but they're all expecting me to deliver...

**SHE:** They want you to deliver what you don't have.

**MIDDLE:** And they're holding me responsible...

**SHE:** And you're holding you responsible.

**MIDDLE:** Right again.

**SHE:** These are not your problems.

**MIDDLE:** You've got to be kidding. They sure do feel like my problems.

**SHE:** That's because you're doing the Middle Slide.

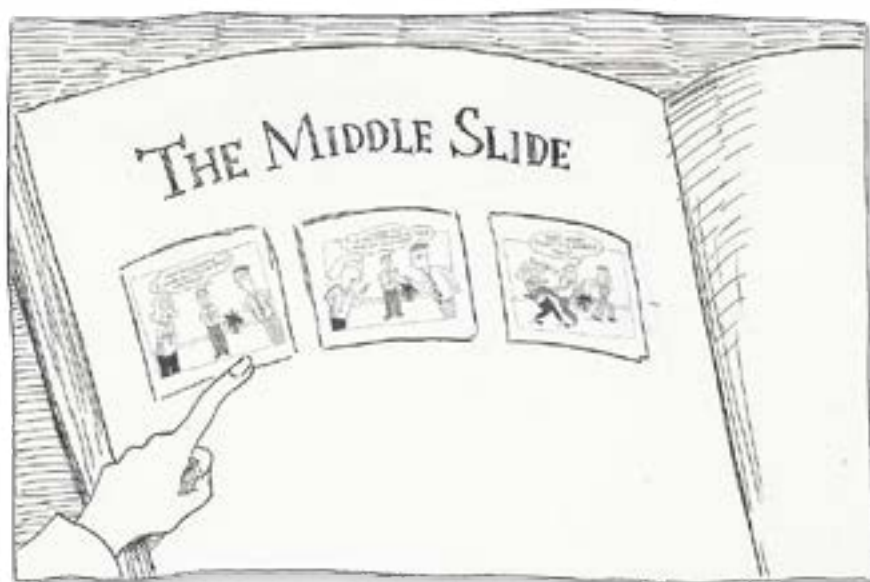
**MIDDLE:** The Middle Slide? I don't get it.

**SHE:** You will. That's why I'm here.

# PART I

Middle Discovers the Ins and Outs of Power and Powerlessness in the Middle.

## 1. Doing the Middle Slide





**MIDDLE:** O.K., so what is this Middle Slide?

**SHE:** It's a dance you do with other people. It starts this way: They have their issues and conflicts with one another. Then what you do is slide in between their issues and conflicts and suddenly their issues become your issues and conflicts. And all of this happens in a flash; you don't see yourself doing anything. It just happens. Once you slide, it becomes crystal clear to you that you are responsible for resolving their issues and conflicts.

**MIDDLE:** I still don't get it.

**SHE:** Allow me to demonstrate. Here's a case. It seems that the Designers and the Workers are having problems with one another. The Workers are complaining that the new design simply doesn't work, and the Designers are insisting that the design is perfect; it's just that the Workers aren't using it correctly.

**MIDDLE:** A familiar tale.

**SHE:** Fine. And let's use that familiar tale to clarify the Middle Slide. *(She points to an illustration in The Manual of Organization Dysfunction.)*  
Have a look.  
Now there's a Middle not doing the Middle Slide. Perfect!  
What do you think?



**MIDDLE:** (Incredulous) What do I think? I think if I did that I'd be sliding out of my job.

**SHE:** Stay cool. I'm just demonstrating a point. Try this less extreme version of not sliding in between. You see, this isn't sliding in either because it's clear to Middle that these are their issues, not Middle's.



**MIDDLE:** I don't think they'd go for that either. They want me to fix this. Me!

**SHE:** Of course they do! I told you, this is a dance you do with others! Not only do you hold you responsible for resolving their issues and conflicts, they also hold you responsible. That's the dance you do together. So everyone's in agreement: It's you. Fix it.



**MIDDLE:** That's exactly how it feels! Now, since you're so clever, I hope you have some way to help me change this...dance.

**SHE:** Patience, Middle. First let's see if we have you correctly diagnosed. *(She thumbs through the Manual, finds the page she is looking for and begins to read.)*

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## 2. Losing One's Middle Mind



**"The Middle Dance of Blind Reflex. Once Middles slide in between, they are torn between the conflicting sides; they become confused; in that middle tearing, if Middles are not confused it is only because they are not paying attention; they listen to one side and that side makes sense; they listen to the other side, they also make sense. Torn Middles have difficulty determining what really makes sense. Should they be on one side? Or the other? If they try to please one, they displease the other; if they try to please both, they likely end up pleasing no one; they fail to receive much positive feedback, they're constantly letting someone down. As a consequence, they feel weak and ineffective. In time, when their condition reaches a critical point, Middles may come to believe they are incompetent."**

**MIDDLE:** PLEASE STOP! This is too painful.

**SHE:** Hang in there! One last point. Pay close attention. *(She continues reading.)*

*"In this tearing, Middles lose their independence of thought and action. It's as if they have no perspective of their own; all that matters is what others want. They as independent thinking persons simply are not present."  
(She closes the manual.)*

**MIDDLE:** Wow. That's pretty heavy-duty stuff. But I'm not sure I understand this loss of...

**SHE:** *(Overlapping)* Loss of independence of thought and action. This is really critical and I want you to understand it.

Over the years, I've spoken with many Middles who'd been involved in intense tearing situations. Several of them used very similar language to describe their experiences.

Something like: "When that was happening, I wasn't there." At first I thought they meant that they weren't in the room, but that's not what they meant. They were physically present, but they as independent thinking persons were not present. All that mattered was what the conflicting parties wanted.

**MIDDLE:** I know that experience. Sometimes I feel like a rubber band. There are these people on either end, tugging on the band. Tugging and tugging. It's like they're real, but all I am is this band.

**SHE:** A perfectly lovely image.

**MIDDLE:** You have a twisted sense of aesthetics.

**SHE:** This inanimate thing between. It can stretch and stretch, and if it stretches too far... Snap!  
So, do you get the picture, Middle? You as an independent, thinking person are not present. All that's present is the band and the tearing.

**MIDDLE:** And the pain.

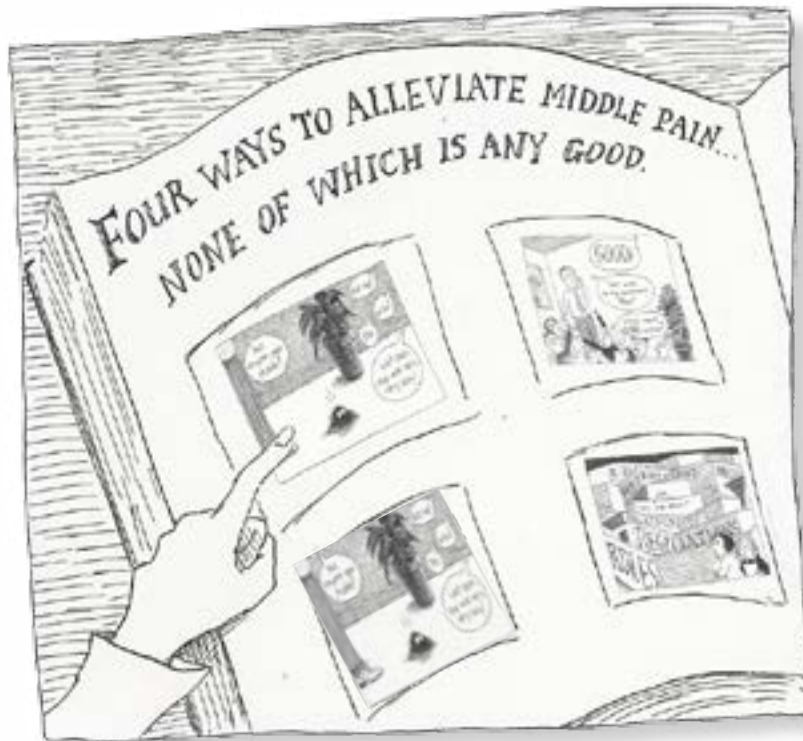
**SHE:** Exactly. The pain. Now the question is: How to alleviate the pain?

**MIDDLE:** That's what I'm searching for.

**SHE:** I understand, and I'm afraid it's not all good news.

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### 3. Middle Sees Her Future, and It's Not a Pretty Picture



**SHE:** *(Pauses to read through several pages in the Manual of Organizational Dysfunctions, then speaks.)* Let me summarize it for you.

There are four basic ways Middles try to alleviate the pain. You've been trying one way. It just hasn't been very effective for you.

**MIDDLE:** My way? What's my way? I don't see myself alleviating any pain.

**SHE:** Like I said, your way hasn't been very effective.

**MIDDLE:** I don't get it.



**SHE:** Your way has been to try to please everybody. You run back and forth. You carry messages from one to the other. You explain one to the other. You make excuses for one to the other. And when nothing works, what do you do? You try harder. Run faster. Explain more. Excuse more. But your way isn't working. And soon, Middle, you will crash, melt, burn out.

**MIDDLE:** (Horrified) Burn out?

**SHE:** Burn out. Turn to ashes. One day they'll be looking for you and you'll be gone. Nothing but a pile of ashes. That's what will become of your way.



**MIDDLE:** Not a pleasant picture.

**SHE:** And you're not alone. You're part of a huge horde of Middles across the world who feel sure that the pain will go away once they find some magical way to please everyone.

**MIDDLE:** O.K. I get your point. But I sure do hope you have some better ways to alleviate the pain.

**SHE:** Don't make too much of alleviating pain. Alcohol alleviates pain. Suicide alleviates pain. Think of what I'm saying in that sense.

**MIDDLE:** Like drugs?

**SHE:** Like drugs. They provide temporary relief. Without dealing with the underlying issue: The absence of independent thought and action.

**MIDDLE:** I haven't been getting much relief – temporary or otherwise - from my way.

**SHE:** Really? Your way has been deeply satisfying.

**MIDDLE:** You've got to be kidding.

**SHE:** Uh uh. Your drug comes from being fair, trying hard. Being the good person. Unappreciated. That's your soothing balm.

**MIDDLE:** Ouch!

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**SHE:** One easy option, of course, is to please some people, the important ones, or at least the ones you feel are important.

**MIDDLE:** Choosing sides?

**SHE:** Exactly.

**MIDDLE:** That doesn't seem fair.

**SHE:** Being fair is your thing, not everyone's. Remember, it's about alleviating the tearing. So, for example, some Middles alleviate the tearing by aligning with Top. Top's priorities are now Middle's priorities. Top's agenda is Middle's agenda. Now at least there is less tearing from Top.



**SHE:** Of course, now Middle has problems with Bottom. And Bottom finds it harder to deal with Middle than with Top.

**MIDDLE:** How come?

**SHE:** Keep in mind that the underlying issue is independence of thought and action. Does this upward-aligned Middle have independence of thought and action?

**MIDDLE:** I think I see what you mean.

**SHE:** Good. This upward-aligned Middle has no more independence than you have. He's living on a borrowed perspective. His position is not his; it's borrowed from Top. So, he may look firm but in reality he is very fragile. Of necessity, he is rigid; he has no wiggle room. Top has wiggle room, not this upward-aligned Middle. He's stuck with Top's position.

**MIDDLE:** So I suppose it can go the other way - Middles aligning with Bottom.

**SHE:** Exactly. And with similar results. Reduced tearing from Bottom, increased tensions with Top.



**MIDDLE:** They don't have the managerial stuff.

**SHE:** Exactly. Middle becomes a pain to Top, the spokesperson for Bottoms, champion of Bottom causes; they lead the protests, start the revolutions. And they are more rigid than Bottoms. They, too, are living on a borrowed perspective.

**MIDDLE:** No wiggle room.

**SHE:** Exactly. That's what happens when you're stuck living with someone else's perspective.

**MIDDLE:** I'm seeing something strange here. What gets me is this. We three Middles all look very different from one another. Like we've got different core values.

**SHE:** That's true.

**MIDDLE:** And we probably don't get along well with one another.

**SHE:** Also true.

**MIDDLE:** But, according to you, we're all driven by the same thing.

**SHE:** It all boils down to reducing the pain of tearing. And you can be sure that everyone has an excellent explanation for why they're aligned the way they are.

"I'm aligned with my boss because that's how it's supposed to be. And, besides, he's the one who controls my pay, bonuses, and career."

"I'm aligned with my Bottoms because they're my people; that's where the work gets done, and someone has to see that they're treated fairly."

**MIDDLE:** And my explanation? I do what I do because that's a Middle's job, what I'm supposed to do: Satisfy everybody. Every time.

**SHE:** Another perfectly acceptable explanation.

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**MIDDLE:** You said there were four ways. I count only three.

**SHE:** Ah yes, the most rigid of them all. The bureaucrat, the one who alleviates the pain of tearing by surrounding himself with such a maze of complex rules and procedures that people do their best to avoid him. So it's four variations on a single theme.

You see, you try to alleviate the tearing by being responsive to everyone; others try to do it by being responsive to one side but not the other; and the bureaucrat tries to alleviate the tearing by being responsive to no one.



**MIDDLE:** Great. That's all really interesting, but where do I go from here? This all seems to be about one form of Middle weakness or another. I am looking for Middle power!

**SHE:** It should be clear by now.

**MIDDLE:** Sorry, guess I need a bit more help.

\*





#### 4. Can Middle Find a Mind of Her Own?

**SHE:** If the key to powerlessness is losing one's independence of thought and action, are you getting any ideas about what could be the key to power?

**MIDDLE:** *(Thinks.)* Maintaining one's independence of thought and action? Uh uh. That can't be all of it. The bureaucrat, the way you described him, he maintains his independence of thought and action, and he's a universal pain in the butt. I don't see his value to anyone but himself.

**SHE:** You're absolutely right. Independence by itself can be destructive or irrelevant. So power is not simply turning Middle loose to do whatever Middle feels like doing. As you say: Where's the value in that?

**MIDDLE:** There has to be some contribution.

**SHE:** Exactly. So let's say that the following was your Middle mantra. You posted it on your mirror where you'd see it every morning; it would be on your desktop, on your computer screen, tattooed on your arm.



**MIDDLE:** I don't do tattoos.

**SHE:** *(Ignoring that)* Anyplace where it would be a regular reminder. Try it on. See how it feels.

**Every day in every way my stand is to be a Middle who maintains my independence of thought and action in the service of the system.**

So what would it be for you if you lived your organizational life, day to day, from that stand? Think about it.

**MIDDLE:** *(Middle spends a few moments thinking it over, then speaks.)* You know what? It won't work. I'm thinking about how this independence of thought and action would play out in my situations – with the Workers, the Designers, the Customers, my Top. Are they looking for an independent Middle? The answer is NO. None of them is looking for independence. They want me to do what they want me to do. Period.

**SHE:** So that's the end of it?

**MIDDLE:** It sure seems like it. What else can I do?

**SHE:** Be a Middle who maintains your independence of thought and action in the service of the system.

**MIDDLE:** I'm telling you: It won't work!

**SHE:** No, you're telling me: they won't like it. They. Notice what you just did. Without a second's hesitation you made yourself Middle to them. In your mind it's all about them: what they will think, how they will react. What about you, Middle? Where are you on being a Middle who maintains your independence of thought and action in the service of the system?

**MIDDLE:** Where am I? The truth? Nervous, very nervous. That's where I am.



**MIDDLE:** All right. See if I have it. Independence in the middle inevitably involves bumping up against someone, someone who doesn't want to be bumped up against. Someone who just wants me to do what he or she wants me to do.

**SHE:** No way around it.

**MIDDLE:** Terrific. This makes "tearing" look more attractive.

**SHE:** Except that now that would be even worse for you.

**MIDDLE:** Worse?

**SHE:** Absolutely. In the good old days of innocence, you did the Middle Slide without awareness. It simply happened. Without awareness there was no choice. You couldn't be blamed because you didn't do anything. Now, whenever you recognize the Slide, you are faced with choice.

**MIDDLE:** To slide or not to slide?

**SHE:** The end of innocence.

**MIDDLE:** If I choose to slide, I'm back into tearing, and if I choose not to slide, I'm into bumping. Bumping or tearing?

**SHE:** That's your choice.

**MIDDLE:** *(After a long period of consideration.)* Here's what. I've spent enough time in tearing, and I know what that gets me; so I'm ready to give bumping a shot.



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## 5. Middle Learns Four Variations on the Middle Slide... None of Which is Any Good

**MIDDLE:** OK. I'm ready to move on. Check me out. See if I've learned my lessons well.

I now understand what this Middle Slide is. I see how it's a dance I do with others where I hold myself responsible for their issues and conflicts, and they hold me responsible for resolving their issues and conflicts; and I see how all of this happens by blind reflex, without awareness or choice; and I recognize the tearing this dance creates and how we Middles, in our various and equally dysfunctional ways, act to reduce that tearing.

And I recognize the inevitability of bumping up against others who may not appreciate being bumped up against.

And finally I recognize my challenge: to be a Middle who maintains my independence of thought and action in the service of the system.

*(Deep breath)* Do I have it?

**SHE:** It appears so.

**MIDDLE:** So now, I am ready to break through – to find my strength, my competence, my contribution as a Middle.

**She:** And we are just about there. One last piece of preparation before turning you loose. Once you're back out in the world, you will find endless opportunities to do the Middle Slide. It comes in a variety of forms, which, in the give and take of daily life, will be easy for you not to see. So let me describe the four most common variations of the Mindless Middle Slide. Your challenge will be to recognize and avoid these as they are happening. Are you ready?

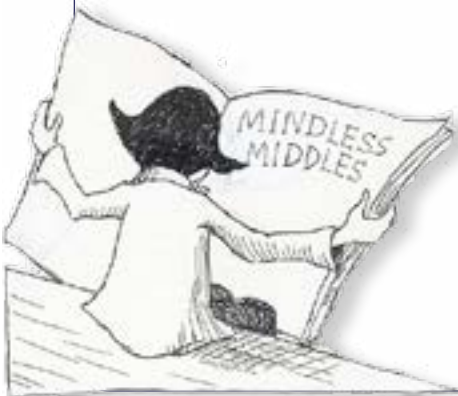
**MIDDLE:** Point the way.



**SHE:** There is the Ask for Direction Slide. When Middles face uncertainty or risk about what they should do, Mindless Middles reflexively ask others – their Top usually - what they should do, rather than consider what they think they should do, thereby doing the Middle Slide.

**MIDDLE:** Got it. Mindless Middles doing The Ask for Directions Slide.

**SHE:** There is the Pass It On Slide. When one party gives Middles directions, or orders, or initiatives to pass on to another party, rather than consider the appropriateness of what they have been given, Mindless Middles reflexively pass it on, thereby doing the Middle Slide.



**MIDDLE:** Got it. Mindless Middles doing The Pass It On Slide.

**SHE:** There is the Do For Others Slide. When others ask Middles to do something for them or get something for them from others, rather than consider if they should be doing what they have been asked to do, Mindless Middles reflexively do what they've been asked to do, dancing to every tune that's called, thereby doing the Middle Slide.

**MIDDLE:** That will be a tough one for me. I'm big on the Do For Others Slide.

**SHE:** And then there is the Being Indispensable Slide. A very very important slide. When Middles find themselves between two or more parties, being the intermediary who passes on questions, answers, and clarifications, back and forth from one party to the other, rather than consider the question: "Why am I doing this? Mindless Middles reflexively remain the indispensable person, needed by all sides, explaining one to the other, translating one to the other, thereby doing the Middle Slide.

**MIDDLE:** Understood. The Being Indispensable Slide. Does that cover it?

**SHE:** There may be more, but master these and you will do just fine, keeping in mind that all this happens without awareness or choice.

**MIDDLE:** Thanks for all the tips, coach. Wish me luck as I head back into the Middle world.

**SHE:** You will need more than luck. You will come up against many challenging moments, times when the temptation to slip into the Middle Slide will be great. Easy and safe.

**MIDDLE:** Yeh. And ineffective.

**SHE:** Just stay awake! And have courage!

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## PART II

### Middle and Muddle: Contrasting Studies in Powerlessness and Power

#### 1. Permission or Forgiveness? That is the Question



*(Middle and Muddle have just left a meeting in their Top's office when it occurs to Muddle that they didn't ask how to proceed with the New Product Rollout.)*

**MUDDLE:** Whoa! Wait a minute. Let's go back and get clear about how they want us to handle it.

**MIDDLE:** Hang on! Just think for a minute. Is this what you want to do?

**MUDDLE:** *(Befuddled)* Of course it is. How else are we going to know what to do?

**MIDDLE:** How else! We're not stupid. We happen to be closer to the situation than they are. Let's put our heads together, come up with a plan, and make it happen. That's what we do.

**MUDDLE:** If you don't mind, I'd rather check it out with them first.

**MIDDLE:** You know how they are. You ask for their leadership and they'll give it to you. Whether you need it or not.

**MUDDLE:** What's wrong with that?

**MIDDLE:** We don't need their leadership. Once we ask for it, we're in the middle again - their messengers, the bearers of their plan.

**MUDDLE:** What's wrong with that?

- MIDDLE:** I told you; we know the situation better than they do. Why would we ask them for direction?
- MUDDLE:** *(Thinks)* Because that's what we do, and, besides, that's what makes me comfortable.
- MIDDLE:** Only until things go haywire. Then we're in the middle again. The Workers blame us for bringing them such a dumb plan. The Tops blame us for our incompetence in carrying out their brilliant plan.
- MUDDLE:** So? It wouldn't be the first time.
- MIDDLE:** *(Stunned)* What are you saying? That this is some sort of Middle Incompetence Tradition we'd be carrying on?
- MUDDLE:** You're making fun of me. What would you do?
- MIDDLE:** We – you and me - could be top around this rollout, take responsibility for making it a success. No one said we couldn't, so why not step up and take it on?
- MUDDLE:** Why not? I'll tell you why not. Because we might mess it up.
- MIDDLE:** We might, and that's what it is to accept responsibility. But why assume we're going to mess up? We take it on and give it our best shot. What do you say? Are you with me?
- MUDDLE:** *(There is a long uncomfortable silence while Muddle gives Middle's question some serious thought, then speaks.)*  
I'll go along on one condition.

**MIDDLE:** What?

**MUDDLE:** If anything goes wrong, we make it clear this was your idea.

**MIDDLE:** Great! You're hopeless. Can't you see what you're doing?  
You're an addicted Middle.

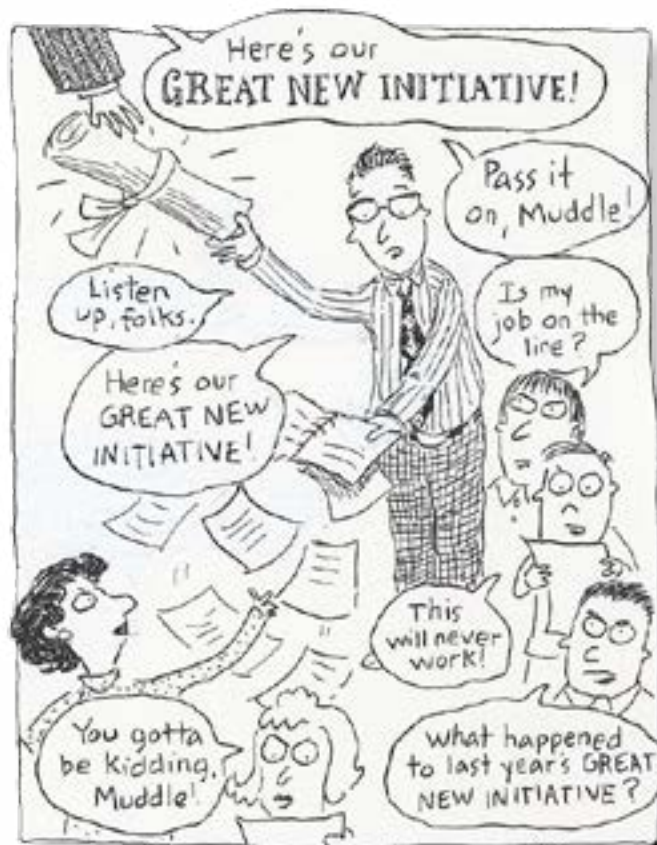
**MUDDLE:** Don't say that! (*Pause*) Besides, what's an  
addicted Middle?

**MIDDLE:** You are. Now you're making yourself middle to me. Is that  
what you want? Think about it. I am not going back to ask for  
direction. I'm moving ahead with this project. Now it's up to  
you. Are you Top with me, or are you my Middle? Is this my  
idea or our idea?

**MUDDLE:** (*Thoughtful silence, then weakly.*) Can I get back to you?

**MIDDLE:** Sorry, I'm not waiting.

## 2. Muddle Performs the Perfect Sewer Pipe



**SHE:** Wow! Did you see that?

**MIDDLE:** What?

**SHE:** Your colleague Muddle just did an absolutely perfect Sewer Pipe.

**MIDDLE:** A sewer pipe?

**SHE:** Beautiful. A perfect 10.

**MIDDLE:** What are you talking about?

**SHE:** Here's what happened. Your Top sent garbage to Muddle to pass on to the Workers in his unit.

**MIDDLE:** Just hold on a second! I know my Top; he would never send down garbage.

**SHE:** Understood. I'm sure he thought he was sending down pure gold. He thought everyone was going to appreciate the news. However...

**MIDDLE:** O.K. So what happened?

**SHE:** Muddle, like a perfectly Mindless Middle Sewer Pipe, just passes the gold-turned-to-garbage on to his Workers, who, of course, do not appreciate it.

**MIDDLE:** And then?

**SHE:** And then, just as you'd suspect, the garbage backs up all over Muddle. The Workers are angry at Muddle. Why are you sending us this trash? What could Top be thinking? Top is embarrassed and miffed. Muddle is humiliated – again. A perfect toxic spill.

**MIDDLE:** Poor Muddle.

**SHE:** And you?

**MIDDLE:** I got the same message from Top and was just about to do the same thing: pass it on. That's my job. Pass it on. Then I woke up.

**SHE:** Always a good beginning.

**MIDDLE:** I asked myself: Is this the old Pass It On Slide? So I stopped and took a good look at Top's message. Top's intention, obviously, was not to send down garbage. Like you said, Top thought he was sending down gold. But, being closer to my Workers and knowing what they were dealing with, I could see that this was not going to play the way Top hoped it would.

**SHE:** Independent thinking. Great!

**MIDDLE:** So I had a conversation with Top. At first he was impatient with me, wanting to get his message out before the end of the quarter. In the end he saw the problem; together we re-worked the message; he was glad that I saved him from a mess. No toxic spill.

**SHE:** It seems so simple, doesn't it?

**MIDDLE:** Not in the moment. In the moment, it's easy to just react. Pass it on. Be a good responsive Mindless Middle.

**SHE:** I can't tell you how many Middle Sewer Pipes I've witnessed. High-level, intelligent, competent, yet Mindless Middles who create toxic spills - trouble for their reports, for themselves, and for their Tops. And when the garbage backs up on them, what do you think they do, regularly?

**MIDDLE:** They probably blame Tops for sending down garbage.

**SHE:** Precisely. And what they don't see is the part they play by their own absence of independent thought and action.

**MIDDLE:** Beware of the Pass It On Slide.

**SHE:** Stay awake!

**MIDDLE:** And have courage.

★



### 3. Muddle 's Career is in Jeopardy



**SHE:** I'm hearing lots of rumbling over at Muddle's division.

**MIDDLE:** It's a real mess over there, and, as usual, Muddle is right in the middle of it. This could be one of those career-ending events for him.

**SHE:** Now what's he up to?

**MIDDLE:** There's been a major shift in direction. Coming right from the Top. Muddle's in charge of coordinating the change in his division. And there's been a lot of confusion and unrest.

*What are the priorities?*

*When is this supposed to happen?*

*Why the sudden shift?*

*What do we keep and what do we change?*

*Are our jobs in jeopardy?*

Muddle is doing the best he can, but he doesn't have all the answers. So he's back and forth with the Tops looking for clarification. They're getting tired of hearing from him. From their perspective this is his job and any competent manager could handle it. Which is also exactly how the front line is feeling about him. So he's getting negative feedback from all sides. How did we get such a weak, ineffective, incompetent Middle!

I sure know what he's feeling. Been there, done that myself.

**SHE:** Poor Muddle. What about you? Didn't you have the same assignment regarding your division?

**MIDDLE:** I did, and this was a tense time for me. You get an assignment, and you do it. That's how it's supposed to be. Get clear about the initiative; understand what's behind it; gather the relevant data; plan your approach; and make it happen. Nine out of ten times that's how I would do it, that's how I see my job. They ask, you do.

But this time, I had an uncomfortable feeling, a sense that this was not the way to go. And then it hit me: It wasn't me they needed to hear from.

I went to my Top and said. "They need to get this message from you, not me."

As you might imagine, this did not go over especially well with my boss. He was busy with other matters; this was my responsibility; I needed to demonstrate some leadership ability. This is your job! he said. So I took a deep breath and said, "No, my job is always to stay focused on what is best for our organization." My boss was a bit taken aback, but he let me make my case. "This is not just another assignment," I said. "You've got a lot of passion behind this initiative; I know how hard you've had to fight for it. No one will be able to speak for it except you." In the end he came around; we worked together on his presentation. The entire division was there. There were lots of questions and I saw how some of these opened up areas I never could have handled. He did a great job of bringing clarity and focus to the division.

**SHE:** Good, so it worked out well.

**MIDDLE:** Mostly. After the meeting my Top came to me and said, “I hope this won’t get to be a regular practice. I’m a busy person and I expect you to take leadership even on difficult assignments.” Since I was expecting congratulations on a job well done, I was more than a bit surprised by his reaction.

**SHE:** So, what did you say? Yes, boss, I promise it won’t happen again.

**MIDDLE:** No, but it was a tense moment. I think I said something like:  
  
Here’s what you can expect from me. One, you can be sure that I will always try to act in what appears to me to be the best interest of this organization. And, two, I will try to have the wisdom to know the difference between situations I ought to be handling and those you ought to be handling. That’s the best leadership I can promise you.

**SHE:** How did that go over?

**MIDDLE:** I couldn’t really tell. He just looked me in the eye, sort of nodded, turned around and left.

**SHE:** I suspect that was a bit more pushback from a subordinate than he’s used to.

**MIDDLE:** This is the “bumping up against” we talked about earlier.

**SHE:** You get used to it.

**MIDDLE:** You may be right. I did have more “bumping up against” with my Workers. There was ongoing tension between them and Procurement about replacing worn-out equipment. Delays, budgetary issues. Meanwhile, plugging along with the worn-out equipment, quality was down and morale was low. Workers came to me, telling me to make the case for the new equipment. I had made the case as best I could several times, but there were always other issues on the agenda and the usual budgetary considerations. So when the Workers came to me this time, I said, “NO. Whenever I bring this up, it’s treated as just one of a number of agenda items, too easy for them to set aside. If you bring it up it will have much more person-to-person impact and be harder for them to dismiss. “Well, the Workers did not like the idea of having to face the Big Guys themselves. It’s your job, Middle. Do it. So we went back and forth and, in the end, they agreed. I worked with them to make their case; I set up the meeting with Procurement, and you can imagine, there was quite a bit of resistance at that end too. The Workers made their case. Once again you could see issues and feelings that came out in that meeting that I never could have communicated: the pride they take in quality work, their unhappiness in settling for less than perfection, their commitment to the organization. The Workers did a great job; the Big Guys saw them in a new light; and the timetable for the new equipment was moved up.

**SHE:** You're getting to be very adept at avoiding the Middle Slide.

**MIDDLE:** You begin to expect some resistance. It's like changing a dance in the middle of the dance, and your partner doesn't want to change the dance. So you have to help them see that this new dance is better than the old one, that it produces better results all around.

**SHE:** You seem to be having some success as a dance instructor.

**MIDDLE:** With one notable failure.

**SHE:** Muddle?

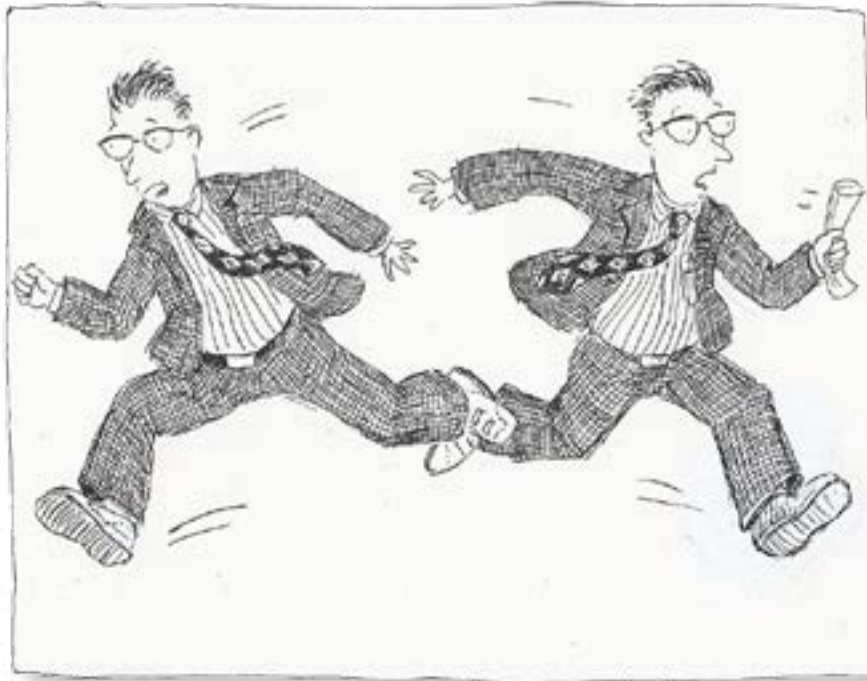
**MIDDLE:** Things have been falling apart for him. He came to me for advice. Wanted to know how I've been handling things. When I told him, he was shocked. He physically jumped away from me. "If I did any of that," he said, "I'd be fired." And then, like a good friend, he warned me to watch my step, that I might get fired too.

And the truth is: That's never far away from my mind.

**SHE:** There is always the question of how much independence a system can tolerate.

★

#### 4. Muddle At Last Finds An Important Job



**SHE:** I see that Muddle has a new assignment.

**MIDDLE:** Customer Liaison, something like that.

**SHE:** You don't seem impressed.

**MIDDLE:** It's not working out well.

**SHE:** Have you talked with him?

**MIDDLE:** He's too busy to talk. Crises. Fires to fight. He acts as if the world will fall apart without his hands-on involvement.

**SHE:** Sounds like an important job.

**MIDDLE:** Absolutely. Important and completely ineffective.

**SHE:** There are more than a few of those important jobs around. How does Muddle manage it?

**MIDDLE:** Here's a story he told me. He's the liaison between the Customer and the Production Team. So first he has these in-depth conversations with the Customer to clarify the Customer's needs.

**SHE:** That makes sense.

**MIDDLE:** Then he meets with the Production Team to fill them in on the project.

**SHE:** That seems reasonable.

**MIDDLE:** The Production Team members are interested in the project; they're motivated to work on it, and they have lots of questions.



**SHE:** And the Middle Slide begins.

**MIDDLE:** Exactly. The indispensable job. Muddle brings the questions to the Customer; the Customer is not completely clear about what is being asked, but she does her best to answer; Muddle brings the answers to the Production Team; they are not completely satisfied with the answers they're getting; and on and on its goes--Team to Muddle to Customer to Muddle to Team to Muddle to Customer. Indispensable Muddle. Except the longer it goes on, the more frustrated both the Customer and team members are becoming; they can't quite get this project on track. And everyone's upset with Muddle; he's just not coming through for any of them.

**SHE:** He does this beautifully, doesn't he?

**MIDDLE:** At every opportunity. Muddle, Master of the Middle Slide. I feel like shouting: MUDDLE, WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN THERE! Put the Customer together with the Production Team and get out of the way!

**SHE:** I suppose he'd feel less important.

**MIDDLE:** Less important and more effective.

★

**SHE:** And what about you, Middle?

**MIDDLE:** Me? I'm in the market for a new name.

**SHE:** What's that about?

**MIDDLE:** "Middle" doesn't do it for me anymore. Middle is a "between" thing— between this and that, as if the important action is always someplace else. That's how I used to feel, but not anymore. Middle is a solid place of its own, a place of strength, a place to make important contributions to the organization.

I said to Muddle, "Get out of the middle; bring Customer and the production team members together. That's where the real action is. The best you can do, Muddle, is facilitate their interaction with one another, and the least you can do is get out of their way"

That's the advice I've been following. I'm constantly looking around the organization and asking myself "What's not happening that should be happening? Who are the people who need to be together to make it happen?" That's what I've been doing: bringing them together, letting them make it happen.

People are noticing what I'm doing. I'm becoming a more valued resource. I can feel it. Lately, I've been consulting with Tops around issues they're facing, and my questions are the same: What is not happening that should be happening? Who are the people who need to be together to make it happen?

**SHE:** You've come a long way since I first met you, hunched over your desk, feeling so weak and ineffective, wondering if your brain was decaying.

**MIDDLE:** I'm more awake now. Not always, but more often. More at-tuned to the Middle Slide. Less likely to ask for permission when I could take responsibility; less likely to become the mindless sewer pipe; less likely to simply do what others ask when it makes more sense to help them do what they and the system need them to do; less likely to get in the way of people who ought to be together; and more willing to take the consequences of those choices.

**SHE:** Awareness, choice, and courage. You've learned your lessons well, Middle.

**MIDDLE:** Even as you say "Middle," I feel that's not my name anymore. I need something more dynamic.

**SHE:** Put it out to your colleagues, M, and see what they come up with.

**MIDDLE:** Before I do that I have one final challenge.

**SHE:** Muddle?

**MIDDLE:** I hate to see him suffering. I need to take one more crack at helping him find power in the middle.

**SHE:** Good luck

★

## 5. Muddle's Last Chance



Middle has been sitting in a corner of Muddle's office observing him deal with a series of phone calls. Each call ends with Muddle weakly whispering into the phone: "I'll see what I can do." He slumps on his desk.

**MIDDLE:** You O.K.?

**MUDDLE:** I used to be.

**MIDDLE:** You used to be?

**MUDDLE:** Yeh, I used to be O.K. I used to be strong... confident... competent. Then they made me a middle manager.

**MIDDLE:** You used to be O.K. And now?

**MUDDLE:** Now I'm a mess.

**MIDDLE:** A mess?

**MUDDLE:** A mess. Weak. Nothing I do is good enough. No one respects me... (*Plaintive*) No one likes me. I can't blame them. I try and try and try, but the harder I try, the worse it gets.

**MIDDLE:** I see.

**MUDDLE:** I can't please anyone. I'm a total incompetent. You see what's been happening. I'm a laughing stock. I'm going to lose my job.

**MIDDLE:** Next thing you're going to tell me: It's your brain.

**MUDDLE:** How did you know? It could be my brain.

**MIDDLE:** It's not your brain!

**MUDDLE:** I've tried everything else.

**MIDDLE:** Uh uh, Muddle. You have not tried everything else. In fact you've only tried one thing; and you've tried that one thing again and again and again, and it's always gotten you the same results.

**MUDDLE:** You're not going to bring up that Middle Slide stuff again, are you? I told you if I tried any of that stuff -

**MIDDLE:** Sure, if you tried any of that stuff you'd be fired. So you said.

**MUDDLE:** Some pickle I'm in. Fired one way, fired the other.

**MIDDLE:** Not exactly, Muddle. Keep on going the way you're going and it's guaranteed you'll be fired. For all we know they're already drawing up the paperwork.

**MUDDLE:** You think so?

**MIDDLE:** It's possible.

**MUDDLE:** And the other way?

**MIDDLE:** At least there's hope.

**MUDDLE:** (*Thoughtful*) So...Do I want to be hanged, electrocuted, or poisoned?

**MIDDLE:** Or get out of jail.

**MUDDLE:** Free?

**MIDDLE:** Afraid not.

**MUDDLE:** *(Thoughtful)* O.K. Talk to me again about this Middle Slide business. Just go easy. I'm a slow learner.

*(The phone rings. Muddle reaches to answer it. Middle grabs Muddle's hand.)*

**MIDDLE:** Let it ring.

**MUDDLE:** *(Frantic)* Let it ring!

**MIDDLE:** Let it ring.

**MUDDLE:** *(Lets go of the phone. Takes a deep breath.)* So this is how it begins.

**MIDDLE:** This is how it begins.

✱

**And with that Muddle begins his odyssey in search of power in the Middle.**



**Middle Bashing**  
**A Note From The Author**



Middle bashing has a long and less than glorious history. My first, and what was to become a typical encounter came at a conference in the early '80s. A presenter was describing his organization's change efforts; everything appeared to be progressing reasonably well with the exception of...our supervisors. When asked to explain, he paused, then whispered conspiratorially, "To tell you the truth, we have a weak supervisory group." What explanations did this imply? Was this a Human Resources failure, the inability to identify supervisors with the right stuff? Or was this a genetic issue, a bent middle gene that clicks on once one enters the Middle world? Not likely.

Fast forward over the next thirty years, story after story of ineffective Middles. Just tweet "Middle Managers" to keep abreast of current developments in Middle Bashing.

Social networking poses the latest threat to Middles. Who needs Middles when we can all deal directly with one another? It won't take long before, suffering from universal overload from requests, demands, notifications, and information we just need to have, we will re-invent Middles.

Recently, we came across a global corporation facing stiff competition that was undertaking a critical change initiative. The problem, as they described it, was Middle Management; they were weak; they weren't doing enough to move the initiative ahead. A world-wide leadership meeting was planned, and a key goal was to hammer those middle managers into shape.

The complaints about Middles – from first line supervisors to high-ranking middle management – are wide-ranging: Middles are weak, stubborn, ineffective, can't get their act together, rigid, and – the one I like best – they won't give up their power! Two points are relevant: First, weak, stubborn, rigid, ineffective – these are not the acts of powerful people; these are more like the behaviors of people who are clinging by their fingernails to conditions threatening to overwhelm them. And, second, these Middles – from first-line supervisors to upper management – are asked to be the empowerers of others. It is not a wise plan to ask people to be the empowerers of others when they themselves are disempowered.

Our challenge, instead of bashing Middles, is to help Middles see, understand, and master the complex middle world in which they live. Awareness, choice, and, ultimately, courage are what are required to make this happen.

Organizations do not need more Muddles; but there will always be a productive role for Middle...or whatever her or his new name is.

Barry Oshry



**MIDDLE is looking for a new, more dynamic name.**

**Won't you help?**

**What's your suggestion?**

To see what others have suggested and make a suggestion of your own.

## **The Book: In The Middle**

**By  
Barry Oshry**

**Read the manual that has changed the lives of thousands of  
Middles just like you.**

*"I can't tell you how meaningful ("In the Middle") is to me, thinking about the squeezes I have been in. It is so logical and pertinent for me in my workplace dealing with customers and fighting for resources internally to keep them happy. Without this class and this book I may well have been crushed by the weight of it by now."*

**Craig W. Robeen**

**[To purchase "In The Middle"](#)**



## The Workshop: Leading From The Middle

Bring into your organization the experiential workshop that is transforming stressful, demanding, and often unrewarding middle positions into the empowered drivers of successful organizational performance.

A series of on-line coaching videos narrated by Barry Oshry follows the workshop supporting ongoing learning and application.

*"My client is getting some real cultural change as a result of the workshop -- people are already using the language, and the Middles have begun Middle Integration meetings without the help of an outside facilitator."*

*Tom Devane, Consultant*

**For more information on:** [The Workshop: Leading From The Middle](#)

## The Play: What A Way To Make A Living: The Search for Partnership in Organizational Life

Bring this wildly entertaining play to your next company retreat. It's loaded with invaluable lessons about organizational life. Those of us who have worked in any kind of organization cannot help but see ourselves in this satirical romp as a demoralized work force, a frazzled middle management team, and a burdened top executive group struggle to find their way to partnership.

*"I laughed until I cried and then cried until I laughed. The impact of this play stays with you long after the performance has ended."*

LaWana Cole

**For more information:** [The Play: What A Way To Make A Living: The Search for Partnership in Organizational Life](#)

## Animations

Enjoy and share these humorous and illuminating Top, Middle, and Bottom animations.

### ***Top: "I'll Handle It."***

*Watch "Super Top." He handles everything...except the really important stuff.*

### ***Middle: "Torn In The Middle."***

*Watch a Middle doing a perfect Middle Slide...managing to disappoint everyone including himself.*

### ***Bottom: "The Choir."***

*Listen to a group of whining victims sing their hearts out...to absolutely no effect.*

### ***Middle Peer Group: "The Middle Meeting."***

*Watch a group of middle peers respond to everything and everyone...except connecting with one another.*

## ***Talks and Presentations***

Contact us to schedule a presentation on Middle Power at your next meeting or conference.

## **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION**

Contact Power+Systems, Inc.  
at [info@powerandsystems.com](mailto:info@powerandsystems.com)  
Call: 617/437-1640.

