

Caught in the Middle

How to improve the lives and performance of newspaper middle managers

By Sharon L. Peters, *Ph.D.*



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sincere thanks to the many editors who gamely agreed to open their newsrooms to this research, and to the hundreds of newsroom participants who contributed their time and candor.

—*Sharon L. Peters, Ph.D.*

PREFACE

The greatest challenge facing the newspaper industry, many of its top leaders have told NMC, is finding good people, developing them, retaining them and keeping them happy. Nowhere is that challenge greater—or more important—than in the ranks of newsroom middle management.

These women and men are the workhorses who make the assignments, direct the coverage and see that the paper comes out every day. They are entrusted with the care and feeding of the rest of the staff—all those reporters, photographers, copy editors, designers and artists—who also need to be recruited, developed and kept happy.

Yet, it's widely believed that newsroom middle management is the worst job in newspapering today: long hours, intense pressure, little respect from below, little support from above. Editors cite in dismay cases of star staffers refusing advancement to middle management, seeing the move as punishment, not promotion.

Yet developing and promoting good managers is essential to the future. As the publisher of one large metropolitan daily recently told NMC, "The biggest issue [is] employing the right people who will take on more and more personal responsibility for the leadership for the organization. More and more people must have the ability and have the clear sense of direction so that they can exercise their own leadership, so it is not coming from the top."

Are the problems of middle management as severe and intractable as they appear?

To discover the truth behind the myths and to find possible solutions, Sharon L. Peters surveyed top editors, rank-and-file newsroom workers and middle managers themselves on the problems and prospects for improvement. She examined the situation of middle managers at small, medium and large

newspapers in all parts of the country, both chain-owned and independent.

Some of what she discovered is surprising and might illuminate the way out of the darkest problems. Much of what her research reveals is universal and can be applied to all newsrooms, but she also takes close-up looks at a small, a medium and a large newspaper to focus on circumstances that are affected by size.

Peters' research shows that with the right effort applied in the right way it is possible to improve both the lives and performance of middle managers.

Table of Contents

THE WORST JOB IN JOURNALISM	6
MAELSTROM IN THE MIDDLE	12
GRADING THE MIDDIES	15
THE GOOD, BAD AND UGLY	27
FACT AND FANTASY	34
THE TRAINING CONUNDRUM	41
A FUTURE IN DOUBT	44
CONCLUSIONS	47
ZEROING IN ON SPECIFICS	49



The Worst Job in Journalism

By Sharon L. Peters, *Ph.D.*

It is widely regarded as the worst job in journalism. The demands are relentless, the sacrifices many and the rewards few.

It is the netherworld called middle management.

Moored between the buffeting of their subordinates on one side and the constantly shifting winds of top management on the other, middle managers are rocked and battered with ferocious regularity.

Middle managers are regularly portrayed by subordinates as ill-behaved automatons who have few skills and fewer journalistic convictions, by top managers as well-intentioned workhorses who get bogged down in process and offer little in the way of initiative or strategic thinking, and by middle managers themselves as hapless victims caught in the crush of circumstances.

If newspaper middle management was never the perfect job, it is inarguably more challenging today, due to the confounding issues of ever-changing technology, shrinking news hole, reduced staffing, shifting public perceptions, ever-evolving competition and a regularly metamorphosing workforce.

So concern about the problems and pitfalls of middle management has reached a feverish pitch. Top management wails about the dearth of capable journalists willing to toss their hats in the ring these days. The woes of newsroom middle managers are frequently addressed in the trade press. Training sessions instruct managers on



how to strip off the Rodney Dangerfield shroud that has settled upon them. Many newspapers are conducting in-house discussions aimed at penetrating the most intractable of the issues. As with every much-discussed topic, there is the possibility that a film of mythology has obscured some of the sharp points of truth. Whether the job is as odious as its press, whether the lot of middle managers is as dreadful as it might appear, may be arguable. Clearly there are problems, but the degree, depth and definition may be debatable. This research was undertaken to sort through the various discussion points; to attempt to separate fact from assumption; to identify the real issues, problems and concerns; to explore the factors that have hampered amelioration up to this point; and to offer information that may lead to some solutions. The 538 participants in this research project included middle managers, reporters and other non-supervisory personnel, and top editors. Their responses provide information and insights that particularize the beefs of and about middle managers, as well as their failings and their relationships with those above them and below them. Some of what the survey participants shared confirms what has long been suspected, some falls into the category of surprising revelation and most can help newsrooms forge reasonable strategies for overcoming the problems.

Among the findings:

- There is a decided disconnect between what top editors identify as the problems of middle management and what the rest of the newsroom middle managers and the people who report to them—identifies as the problems. Thus, even the most well-meaning and energetic editors may be considering or taking actions that they regard as ameliorative and that the staff—middle managers

and non-supervisors alike—will probably regard as meaningless.

- Top editors tend to view their middle managers' performance and competence somewhat more positively than middle managers and their subordinates do. Also, top editors tend to see the job of being a middle manager as more odious than middle managers and their staffs do.
- Reporters and other non-supervisors believe many problems would be solved if their supervisors would spend more time with them. Non-supervisors listed "not spending enough time with their employees" as one of the top contributors to sub-par performance among middle managers, and they cite "isolated or inaccessible" as one of the key traits common among the worst middle managers. Neither top editors nor middle managers see the time-with- subordinates issue as critical to middle managers' job performance.
- The vast majority of middle managers do not make excuses when it comes to failings within their ranks. Their general tendency is not to blame subordinates who are unskilled or top editors with unrealistic expectations, but rather to acknowledge that there are among them supervisors who are under-trained, incompetent or lazy.

- Communication shows up throughout the survey as a major problem. Subordinates and middle managers gave it among the lowest grades when assessing supervisors' performance in 11 routine supervisory skills, and cited it as the single greatest factor in sub-par middle manager performance. Also, staffers and middle managers placed "good communication" and "good listening skills" high on their lists of Top 10 characteristics of the best middle managers. Top editors did not regard communication as a significant factor in middle manager performance.
- Middle managers consistently indicated they regard themselves as functionaries whose primary goal and role is to feed the news hole. They readily acknowledge they are weak in interpersonal skills. They indicate little sense of responsibility for crafting change or extending the presumed parameters of their jobs. And their definition of too much work centers primarily on those things that are not directly related to pushing copy, such as administering performance reviews, attending meetings, hiring personnel and attending to administrative duties.

Who participated?

The respondents were from newspapers in 14 states: Arizona, Georgia, Indiana, Virginia, New York, Kentucky, Washington, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Florida, South Carolina, Missouri, Tennessee and Colorado.

The participating newspapers included some independently held properties as well as some held by major chains, including Gannett, Knight-Ridder, Scripps-Howard, Tribune Co., Cox and Freedom.

Methodology

Participants in this research project responded to a two-page written questionnaire consisting of 21 multi-part questions relating to the problems and performance of and perceptions about middle managers at their own newspapers.

The survey respondents were from 19 randomly chosen newspapers in 14 states. They were classified into three job categories: top editors, which included all assistant managing editors, deputy managing editors, managing editors, executive editors and editors; middle managers, which included all supervisory personnel below the

level of AME; and non-supervisory journalists, which included reporters, copy editors, photographers, designers and artists. All the participants responded to the same 20 questions, mostly open-ended, and there was one question that was job-category-specific. Ten percent of the respondents were classified as top editors, 27 percent were middle managers and 63 percent were non-supervisory employees. Of the 538 participants, 55 percent were male, 40 percent female and 5 percent did not specify gender. The average age of all respondents was 40, and the average number of years in the newspaper business 17. When the

survey participants were grouped into the three survey job categories, the average age shifted slightly: Among reporters and other non-supervisory employees, the average age was 38 and average number of years in the business 15. Among middle managers, the average age was 41 and average number of years in the business 18; among top editors the average age was 47 and average years in the business 25.

Nineteen percent of the participants were from what were classified for this project as small newspapers (65,000 circulation or lower); 39 percent were from midsize newspapers (under 175,000); and 42 percent were from metro newspapers. Of the nineteen newspapers, four were small newspapers, seven were midsize and eight were metros.

At small and midsize newspapers, all of the professional journalists were asked to participate; at metro newspapers, all journalists within one department—specified by the researcher—were asked to participate. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Participation rates ranged from 19 percent to 70 percent. Thirty percent of the participants were cityside or metro reporters; 29 percent were from features; 13 percent were from sports; 10 percent were copy editors; 6 percent were from photo, art or design; 2 percent were from business; 1 percent were from the editorial page; and the remaining 9 percent did not specify department.

Maelstrom in the Middle

Middle management is an inarguably tough place to be. Of that there is little dispute. But is it the steadily worsening spiral it is characterized as?

Absolutely, said most top editors. Maybe, maybe not, said middle managers, taking a position mirrored by their subordinates.

Among top editors, 68 percent said the job of being a middle manager has become measurably worse in the last five years (23 percent said it is better than five years ago and 9 percent said there has been no change). Moreover, in a rather extraordinary admission, 55 percent of the top editors said their current jobs are easier than their previous jobs as middle managers.

Middle managers were somewhat less vehement about a recent downward spiral: 50 percent of middle managers said the job has grown worse, 24 percent said it has improved, 20 percent said there has been no change and 6 percent weren't sure. Almost invariably, the middle managers who believe the job has improved in recent years work at newspapers where, they pointed out, there has been a recent change in top management, and the new regime emphasizes improved communication, greater autonomy and mutual respect.

Among non-supervisors, 45 percent said the job of being a middle manager has grown worse, 15 percent said it has gotten



better, 20 percent said there has been no change and 20 percent weren't sure.

**It's worst at big papers
The perception that the
job of middle manager has
gotten steadily worse in
recent years is felt most
acutely at metro papers. Sixty
percent of all three levels of
metro respondents believe the
job has gotten worse in the
last five years.**

**Middle managers and
their subordinates
commented that the level of
corporate intrusion, the
paperwork demands and
bottom-line obsession have
become crushing.**

So although around half—more or less—of middle managers and non-supervisors believe the job of being a middle manager has grown progressively worse, about one-fourth of them—more or less—think it has gotten better. This suggests that middle managers in general have not descended en masse into an automatic, blanket response that everything is awful and there is no hope for or acknowledgment of improvement. (Although at some individual newspapers in this study a group-think mentality of victimization and hopelessness does seem to exist).

So top editors, despairing over the lot of middle managers, would do well to keep in mind that the presumption of job deterioration that is often assumed to be universal may not exist. This is not to say that because one-quarter of the newsroom population believes there has been improvement that there is little need to seek other corrective strategies. Rather, it says that top editors should identify what at their own paper may have improved the lot of middle managers in recent years so they can take steps to ensure that those improvements — even if unintended or accidental—are preserved.

Moreover, it may be important for many top editors to readjust their view of the trauma and tragedy of middle management.

Top editors who have an overly negative view of the position of middle managers may eventually inflate their ratings of middle managers' performance or make excuses for middle managers' poor performance and, ultimately, lower performance expectations for that group. This is a well-documented phenomenon in workplace literature, and there is evidence that this may be going on at some of the newspapers that participated in this research project. For example, top editors gave somewhat higher scores to middle managers' performance in seven of 11 routine management skills than middle managers gave to themselves and their peers.

So although top editors should continue to pursue all means of improving the work lives of the middle manager corps, they must guard against the very human tendency to engage in excuse-making and reduce standards when empathy degenerates into leniency.

What they like about the job

When middle managers were asked what they find most appealing about their jobs, they were three times more likely to give answers having to do with coverage and authority levels than working with people.

A selection of their responses:

- **“Directing and improving content.”**
- **“Being able to shape coverage.”**
- **“Decision-making authority.”**
- **“Control.”**
- **“Some degree of power.”**
- **“The salary.”**
- **“The chance, however small, to effect change.”**
- **“The teaching aspect of it.”**
- **“The chance to work with people and watch them grow with their jobs.”**
- **“I love developing people and hate the dark grind of reporting.”**

Grading the Middies

Whatever one's view of the relative agony or ecstasy of being a middle manager, there is remarkable agreement among top editors, middle managers and non-supervisors as to the general overall performance of middle managers.

When everyone graded their newspaper's middle managers on a scale of 1 to 10, the average clustered in the 6 or 7 range. That's the aggregate average given by top editors, middle managers and non-supervisors alike, a range that holds department-to-department and regardless of the size of the newspaper (although middle managers at some individual newspapers received somewhat higher or somewhat lower averages).

That reporters, photographers and copy editors—renowned for their lack of charity, particularly toward their bosses—rated middle managers just the same, on the whole, as middle managers and top editors did would be surprising to some. It must be regarded as a positive thing that all three levels of newsroom personnel share the opinion that although middle managers are by no means perfect, neither are they miserably inadequate.

Moreover, there is a tendency to believe middle managers are doing a better job today than they were five years ago. Forty-one percent of all respondents said middle managers are better, 21 percent said worse, 19 percent said there has been no change and 19 percent did not answer the question.

The belief that middle managers have improved in recent years is felt more strongly by middle managers and top editors than by rank-and-file workers. Fifty-eight percent of middle managers, 67 percent of top editors and 34 percent staffers said they are better; 13 percent of middle managers and top editors



and 27 percent of non-supervisors said they are worse. The remaining 20 percent of top editors, 29 percent of middle managers and 39 percent of non-supervisors said there has been no change or did not offer an opinion.

Still, although the overall performance scores for middle managers hovered around 7 on a 10-point scale, they were many aspects of their work that received substantially lower scores.

When survey participants were asked to grade the performance of middle managers at their papers in 11 routine supervisory skills—from administering performance reviews to news judgment to clarity of vision—the aggregate scores ranged from 4.69 to 8.68. At some individual newspapers some categories received scores substantially lower and somewhat higher than those numbers.

In general, the participants gave higher marks to managers' professional/journalism skills, and lower marks to personnel management skills, such as performance coaching, feedback and clarity of vision.

Scores by job classification

Here are the average scores, on a 10-point scale, given to middle managers for 11 management tasks, based on the responses of non-supervisors, middle managers and top editors at all 19 participating newspapers.

	Non-supervisors	Middle managers	Top editors
Line editing	6.45	7.10	7.00
Interpersonal skills	5.97	6.32	6.50
Communication	5.34	5.58	6.18
Commitment to journalism	7.02	7.75	8.68
Performance reviews	5.86	5.86	5.78
Performance coaching	4.69	5.32	5.32
Clarity of vision	4.97	5.51	5.65
News judgment	6.55	7.19	7.47
Regular feedback	5.07	6.23	5.95
Improves staffers' work	5.79	6.44	7.03
Story ideas	5.60	6.21	6.42

Also, middle managers gave themselves and their peers slightly higher scores across the board than non-supervisory employees did, but the scores they gave themselves and their peers were lower than the scores given them by top editors in most categories.

What is most interesting is that regardless of where one appears on the chain of command, there is across-the-board agreement that performance coaching and clarity of vision are the two greatest weaknesses of middle managers. It is remarkable that all three levels consistently give these the lowest ratings. Amelioration of these two deficiencies should be a priority, and given the consensus about the severity of the problems, such efforts are likely to receive widespread support.

Regular feedback, communication, interpersonal skills, performance reviews, improving staffers' work and story ideas also received relatively low scores among middle managers and non-supervisors alike.

There is only slight variation in the participants' grading of these 11 skills, whether aggregated by newspaper size or job classification.

Scores by newspaper size

Here is the average of scores given to middle managers by participants of all ranks for 11 routine management tasks, based on newspaper size.

	Small	Midsize	Metro
Line editing	6.44	6.97	6.50
Interpersonal skills	6.16	6.40	5.81
Communication	5.84	6.07	5.34
Commitment to journalism	7.87	7.50	7.00
Performance reviews	5.99	5.80	5.84
Performance coaching	5.17	5.11	4.62
Clarity of vision	5.49	5.37	4.85
News judgment	7.18	6.95	6.49
Regular feedback	5.45	5.83	5.11
Improves stories	6.08	6.37	5.78
Story ideas	6.08	5.90	5.67

Although it is certainly better to see a score of 7.8 than 7.6, a difference of a fraction of a point between a midsize paper and a large paper, for example, should not be seen as significant. What is noteworthy is response patterns, and the one that emerges here is that those who work at metro newspapers gave lower scores to middle managers in almost every category than participants from smaller or midsize newspapers did. This could be a function of age. The metro participants were somewhat older than participants at small or midsize papers were, and with experience come higher expectations. It could also be connected to the larger staff size and sprawling newsroom geography, which results in less face-to-face time between supervisors and subordinates and possibly diminished performance as a result.

When asked, "Among middle managers whose performance is inadequate, what are the most common factors leading to their sub-par performance," respondents were given the opportunity to offer up to three answers. They came up with 35 different explanations, ranging from no follow-through to no commitment, from resisting change to turf issues.

Why middle managers fall short		
Here are the most frequent explanations each group gives for sub-par performance by middle managers.		
Non-supervisors	Middle managers	Top editors
Don't listen and/or Communicate	Don't listen and/or communicate	Insufficient management skills/training
Insufficient planning/organization	Too much work/too little time	No leadership ability
Insufficient time with employees	Insufficient planning/organization	Narrow vision
*No leadership ability	Insufficient management skills/training	Insufficient experience/knowledge
*Narrow vision	No time to think	No initiative
Insufficient knowledge/experience		
*Tie		

Non-supervisors and middle managers agree the single greatest factor in middle managers' inadequate performance is that they don't listen or don't communicate. The two groups also agree that insufficient planning or organization is a major problem.

Yet the issues of listening/communicating and planning/organizing were not mentioned with sufficient frequency by top editors to have wound up on their list of five most frequently stated reasons for inadequate performance. The likely reason is that from where top editors sit, these are not problems. And they would not be expected to be. Few middle managers would think of not listening to or communicating on demand with top editors. Indeed, communicating up is one of the first skills new or would-be middle managers master. Communicating horizontally or down is another thing entirely. And listening-to peers and subordinates in addition to the honchos-is a skill few middle managers are strongly motivated to develop.

On the matter of planning and organizing, what often happens is that middle managers tend to the tasks that make them appear organized and well planned to those above them. They might be diligent about putting together budgets and quite good about making deadlines, for example. But what is not obvious to the upper echelons is that assignments may not be parceled out until the last minute, story discussions may not be initiated until long after the reporting has already begun, or that two or three staffers may be unknowingly working on the same story. Thus, editors are not aware of, or are not identifying, a significant problem.

Also noteworthy: Non-supervisors and top editors see lack of leadership ability, narrow vision and lack of knowledge/experience as significant problems, but middle managers do not include them on their list. This could be

Trends in scoring

Non-supervisory personnel tended to rank middle managers slightly lower than middle managers and top editors did.

Metro personnel from all classifications tended to give slightly lower scores than did those at midsize and small papers.

Features and sports personnel gave slightly lower scores as well.

But the averaged differences are merely a fraction of a point, and not highly significant.

a case of mass denial on the part of middle managers. More likely it is that middle managers expect leadership and vision to come from higher levels and don't really regard them as intrinsic to their job description. If this is so, it may be because they have felt micromanaged away from exhibiting any individual leadership or vision, or it may be because these can be rather tough skills to master and it is simpler to ignore them than to own them.

Still, everyone else seems to regard leadership and vision as part of middle managers' jobs, which means that one of two things must transpire: Middle managers must be re-educated to understand these are important parts of their jobs, or top editors and non-supervisors must readjust their expectations.

It also is noteworthy that all of the items on the middle managers' Top 5 list are task-tending oriented. This is understandable, since middle managers are the gristmills of the newsroom and when the more mechanical aspects of their work break down, the ramifications can be quite hideous. Top editors and non-supervisors, on the other hand, point to some of the more big-picture aspects, such as vision, leadership and initiative. This may illuminate one important philosophical difference between middle managers and those above them and below them, and one that requires some discussion in newsrooms.

Finally, middle managers seem to be the only ones who believe too much work and too little time can lead to consistent sub-par performance. Everyone agrees middle managers are overburdened—this is clear elsewhere in the survey results. However, top editors and non-supervisors indicate that while having too much work can be an obstacle to doing stellar work every hour of every day, when middle managers are regularly performing at sub-par levels, there are many reasons, and overwork is not among them.

As one reporter wrote, "The bad [managers] use over-work as an excuse. If they had half as much work they would still be bad." Another reporter wrote, "We all know that the best managers are consistently loaded down with more and more work, and the worst ones are removed from more and more of the work." And a third said, "The good [managers] know how to prioritize and work efficiently and they give the best of their attention and energy to the things that matter. They have a lot to do, and although they may not be doing things as we would like, they don't let their standards slide."

An editor observed, "Some [managers] spend a lot of time spinning their wheels. They don't make decisions, they put off doing things and they get caught in a crush. This is a pattern and it isn't overwork, it is poor time management." Another editor commented, "A lot of the poor performers spend a lot of time on process, because that's what they're comfortable with. They don't really have too much work—at least all of the time—but they make too much out of some of the marginal work they do have."

In short, the belief among top editors and non-supervisors seems to be that middle managers may well be overworked, but the solid ones manage not to sink into substandard performance. When we sort this same issue—what factors lead to sub-par performance—by newspaper size, the explanations are essentially the same, but there are some slight variations. Participants at metro papers list "they are micromanaged" as the second most prevalent reason for sub-par performance. And at small newspapers "no attention to detail" is the fourth most mentioned reason.

By most accounts it is a variety of personal failings—no vision, poor planning and organization, poor communication skills—that leads to consistent sub-par performance. It's an entirely different set of circumstances—external, over which middle managers have very little control—that keeps

them from doing consistently excellent work. When the survey participants were asked, "What are the factors that prevent newsroom managers from being consistently excellent?" they offered 28 explanations, ranging from technology and production problems to ingrained attitudes, from news hole allocation to too little contact with top editors. Here again there was a vast difference of opinion, depending upon where one sits in the newsroom.

Too much work/too many demands was the most often offered answer from all three job categories—subordinates, middle managers and top editors alike: 24 percent of the non-supervisors, 39 percent of the middle managers and 36 percent of the top editors all offered this as an explanation.

Beyond that, there was little accord, but the non-supervisors' and middle managers' answers were more similar to each other than to those of the editors.

The second most offered explanation—from both non-supervisors and middle managers—was too-limited staff and resources. Top editors also acknowledged this as a problem—it was the third most frequently volunteered answer, after too little training (an answer that ranked No. 6 among middle managers and was offered by only a handful of non-supervisors).

The third most frequently offered answer—again from subordinates and middle managers alike—was too many meetings. This was a non-issue among top editors only 8 percent of them identified this as an obstacle to excellence, a response rate that placed it far down the list of problems.

The fourth greatest issue according to non-supervisors was micromanaging/second guessing/ interference by top editors, an issue that was middle managers' fifth most frequently cited concern, behind insufficient support staff to handle the increasing avalanche of administrative duties. Neither micromanaging nor the need for support staff was among the

Barriers to success

The greatest roadblocks to middle manager excellence, according to top editors, in descending order are:

- **Too much work.**
- **Too little training.**
- **Limited staff/resources.**
- **Lack of departmental vision.**
- **Lack of vision and/or support from above.**
- **A staff that is inexperienced or not sufficiently skilled.**

Top 6 obstacles mentioned by top editors.

The fifth biggest problem, according to rank-and-file workers, is that middle managers report to top editors who are themselves deficient. This was an explanation offered by only a handful of middle managers and by no top editors.

The sixth biggest problem, according to non-supervisors, was inexperience, an answer that did not make it the middle managers' or top editors' Top 6 list.

Middle managers' sixth most frequently offered explanation was insufficient training, a problem that top editors ranked as the second most important issue and one that only a few staffers cited.

Clearly, if the middle managers and their subordinates are correct, only top editors can remove most of the blocks to excellence.

Another issue related to managers' job performance is—as always and with all organizations—the matter of competence. There is widely divergent opinion in this study. Non-supervisory employees believe there are more incompetents and fewer highly competent middle managers in their newsrooms than top editors believe. Middle managers' assessment of themselves and their peers falls somewhere between the views of their bosses and their subordinates.

As a starting point, there is remarkable agreement among the three groups—top editors, middle managers and non-supervisory people—when it comes to declaring the percentage of competent middle managers in their newsrooms: Each group puts the number at 43 or 44 percent.

Then disagreement emerges. Asked what percentage of middle managers at their newspapers could be classified as highly competent, non-supervisors said 35 percent, middle managers said 43 percent and top editors said 48 percent. Asked what percentage could be classified as incompetent, non-

Metro reporters more negative

Non-supervisors say the percentage of incompetent middle managers is higher than middle managers or top editors say it is. This pattern holds true whether one is employed at a small, midsize or metro newspaper.

However, reporters and other non-supervisors at metro papers put the percentage of incompetent managers higher (25 percent) than their counterparts at either midsize or small newspapers (18 percent to 21 percent respectively).

Moreover, reporters and other non-supervisors at metro and small newspapers claim they have a lower percentage of highly competent managers (about 30 percent at each) than those at midsize newspapers (42 percent) say.

supervisors said 21 percent, middle managers said 14 percent and top editors said 9 percent.

The matter and perception of competence is more complicated than it might appear on the surface. Competence is not easily measured or read. It is highly subjective. A person's view of another's competence is based on his or her standards, expectations, personal competence and a host of other contributors. Also, there can be some biases. Conventional wisdom, for example, suggests that older supervisors, because of their experience, their seasoning and their maturity, would logically be regarded by most people as more competent than younger managers. The results of this study challenge that. Thirty-six percent of the respondents said there is absolutely no difference between the competence level of middle managers over the age of 40 vs. those under the age of 40. And although 32 percent said over-40 managers in their newsrooms are more competent, 19 percent said under-40 managers are more competent and 13 percent weren't sure.

There is an intriguing deviation from this finding, however, when the responses of only non-supervisors are examined. Non-supervisory employees under age 35 were more likely to say under-40 supervisors are the more competent; non-supervisors over age 35 were much more likely to say supervisors over age 40 are more competent. (In each of the two age groups, about 36 percent said age and competence do not correlate.)

This is not an unexpected finding. Previous research has found that older workers often have higher expectations of their bosses, and their perceptions of their supervisors' ability to challenge them and help them grow is a cornerstone of their definition of competence.

Conversely, younger workers may have a preference for managers roughly their own age because of similarities in interest and styles and a natural affinity for members of their own cohort.

The many variables relating to the judgment about and definition of competence make it difficult to come an absolute understanding about how the relative youth or maturity of the middle manager corps plays into the problems of most newsrooms.

But what is clear is that top editors are retaining some managers whom they believe to be incompetent. More than half of the top editors in this research project acknowledged having some incompetent middle managers in their ranks—and the percentage they say falls within that classification ranges from 10 percent to 40 percent.

Metro staffers prefer older bosses

Employees of metro papers display a decided preference for older supervisors. While about one-third of them said age is irrelevant when it comes to assessing competence, only 15 percent believe their under-40 supervisors are more competent, while more than twice as many—35 percent—said over-40 supervisors are more competent (15 percent were not sure).

This may be a result of the higher average age of participants at metro papers—45 years old vs. 39 at midsize papers and 33 at smaller papers—and the tendency for older workers to see older bosses as more competent.

However, several older reporters contacted to comment on these findings suggested that there is another explanation. The need at metro papers for large numbers of middle managers is so great and so constant that scores of employees are placed in supervisory positions without sufficient training, experience or guidance. Owing to the size and complexities of the operation, as well as top editors' distance from the staff, middle managers can operate for months or years without significant incompetence being discovered or addressed.

At smaller and midsize newspapers, older reporters say, incompetence is not so easily overlooked. Also, at smaller and midsize newspapers, younger managers are often promoted to supervise people with whom they have worked for years. Their skills and abilities are well-known, and when they fall short as managers, there is rarely a tendency to lay it off to overall incompetence. At metro papers, younger supervisors may have no history with people they manage, and the competence judgment is likely to be swifter and harsher.

The Good, Bad and Ugly

Good managers in any field possess a constellation of laudatory characteristics. Nevertheless, the most highly prized characteristics in newsrooms can be very different from those touted in current management books.

Survey participants were asked to list up to six defining characteristics of the best middle managers they have worked with. They put forth a broad range of more than 60 descriptors, ranging from friendly, patient and courageous to good coach, problem solver and big-picture thinker. Other attributes included inspiring, enthusiastic, confident, motivating, hardworking and able to make work fun.

One's view of the most important characteristics, however, seems to depend upon one's place in the newsroom hierarchy.

Three attributes wound up on the 10 most frequently mentioned lists of non-supervisors, middle managers and top editors alike: organized, collaborative and possessing the technical skills to improve subordinates' work.

Other descriptors among those most frequently mentioned by non-supervisors as well as middle managers (but not top editors): good communication skills, sufficient knowledge and/or experience, good listener and empathy, compassion or humaneness.

Characteristics among the Top 10 from subordinates but neither of the other two groups: enthusiastic and strong advocate for employees or their work.



Middle managers named two attributes that did not show up in the other two groups' Top 10: clear expectations or vision and hardworking.

Middle managers and top editors agreed on two traits: strong people skills and creativity.

Top editors' Top 10 list included four descriptors that did not show up on the Top 10 lists of non-supervisors or middle managers: big-picture thinker, takes responsibility, high energy and high level of journalistic wisdom, integrity, ethics or judgment. One characteristic showed up with both top editors and non-supervisors but not middle managers: flexibility.

It is noteworthy, given the open-ended nature of this question and the limitless number of adjectives that could be

Traits of the best middle managers

Here are the Top 10 most frequently mentioned characteristics of the best middle managers according to members of each group, presented in descending order.

Non-supervisors	Middle managers	Top editors
Technical skills To improve work	Hard Worker	Technical skills
Empathetic/compassionate/ Humane	Organized	Good people skills
Good listener	Empathetic/Compassionate	Flexible
Enthusiastic	Good Communicator	Creative
Good communicator	Experienced/knowledgeable	Collaborative
Organized	Technical skills	Organized
Flexible/adaptable	*Collaborative/team player	Big-picture thinker
Experienced/knowledgeable	*Good listener	Take responsibility
Advocate for employees' work	Creative	Journalistic wisdom/ethics
Collaborative/team player	Good people skills	High energy
	Clear vision/expectations	

dreamed up, that there was as much agreement as there was. In an era when many in the profession question priorities, standards and expectations, it should be some comfort that there is fairly widespread agreement among all levels about some of the important characteristics of good supervisors.

It is interesting, if predictable, that "advocate" appeared only on the non-supervisors' Top 10 list. Everyone in such a position would like to think that someone in authority is looking out for his or her work or well-being. In fact, there is something of a self-serving bias in the attributes from all three groups. Every one of the lists can be seen on some level as being dedicated to characteristics that would ease or improve the lives or work of that particular group of employees. And this is to be expected. Missing, however, in all of this—from every level—is any reference at all to reader focus or community knowledge or connectivity, the industry mantras for more than a decade.

Once again, middle managers tend to focus on skills that will keep the trains rolling on schedule. They mentioned hard worker with sufficient frequency to land that at the top of the list. Flexibility, on the other hand, does not appear on the middle managers' list (although it does on non-supervisors' and top editors' lists), possibly because flexibility very often bogs down expediency, a prime goal of middle managers.

Also intriguing is that both non-supervisors and middle managers include good listening skills and strong communication on their lists, but top editors do not. Undoubtedly, these are characteristics that top editors value, but they are such a normal part of top editors' interaction with middle managers as to be completely overlooked. Everyone always listens to the top editors (though perhaps to no one else); everyone always communicates with the top editors when that is demanded (but perhaps with no one else). Top editors probably would do well to pay more attention to how their middle

Views differ by age

The characteristics ascribed to the best managers hold fairly constant no matter what the employee's gender or number of years in the business or department. A few characteristics, however, correlate to age:

Non-supervisors under age 30 are five times more likely to mention patient, supportive and makes work fun than older workers.

Non-supervisors over age 40 are four times more likely to mention familiarity with the beat/jobs they direct, trusts employees, inspiring and sense of humor than younger employees.

managers communicate with and listen to their peers and subordinates, and to insist upon better listening and communicating at all levels.

On this same question, when the responses of only non-supervisors are examined according to the size of the newspaper they work for, the results remain quite consistent, although some

Staffer’s views of the best middle managers

These are the most frequently mentioned characteristics of the best middle managers according to non-supervisors, sorted by newspaper size, presented in descending order of frequency.

Small newspapers	Midsized newspapers	Metro newspapers
Good listener	Technical skills	Organized
Technical skills	Good communicator	Empathetic
Hard worker	Empathetic	Experienced/knowledgeable
Organized	Collaborative/Team player	Creative
Empathetic	Smart	Good listener
Good communicator	Good listener	Technical skills
Collaborative	Advocate	Flexible/adaptable
Decisive	Organized	Good communicator
Good coach	Experienced/knowledgeable	Hard worker
Enthusiastic	Journalistic wisdom/integrity	Good people skills

additional attributes come to the fore. Good coach and decisive emerge on the list at small newspapers; smart shows up on the list at midsize newspapers; and creative appears on the list at metro papers.

No middle manager can be all things to all people. That said, there are certain characteristics that are prized no matter the size of the staff and market, no matter whether one is looking up or down the chain of command. These universally prized attributes are technical skills, organizational skills and a collaborative/team player work style. But that is only a partial picture. Most middle managers are careful to develop the skills and characteristics valued by top editors, once those are properly communicated. They should pay equal attention to the characteristics revered by their peers and subordinates: empathy,

Traits of the worst middle managers

These are the most often cited characteristics of the worst middle managers, sorted according to job type, presented in descending order of frequency.

Non-supervisors	Middle managers	Top editors
Disorganized/poor planners	Disorganized/poor planners	Disorganized
Out for self	Out for self	Will not take responsibility
Poor communicators	Lazy	Yes men and women
Inflexible	*Poor communicators	Negative/can't do attitude
Yes men and women	*Inflexible	Inflexible
Don't listen	Controlling	No follow-through
Lazy	Indifferent	Out for self
Unqualified or inexperienced	Yes men and women	Poor communicators
Arrogant	No vision	Lazy
*Isolated/inaccessible	Inconsistent/unfair	Poor news judgement
*Caustic/rude	Poor people skills	
*tied		

good listening skills and diligent communication.

In describing the characteristics of the worst middle managers, there is relatively more agreement among the three job types.

A large proportion of the characteristics cited are, quite simply, bad behavior—selfish, self-absorbed behavior that most people would find offensive in any human being, but that is particularly grating in a co-worker. A portion of it is less-than-stellar professional habits and practices. Very little, if any, is the unavoidable byproduct of being in a difficult, stressful role.

All three groups agree that the worst middle managers are disorganized, lazy, out for self, inflexible, bad communicators who are yes men and women. Staffers also throw into the mix arrogant, unqualified and inaccessible. Middle managers zero in on controlling, indifferent, lacking vision, unfair or inconsistent and rude. Top leaders cite unwillingness to take responsibility, negative outlook, no follow-through, poor news judgment and

**Views of bad managers vary by newspaper size
Here are the most often cited characteristics of the worst middle managers, according to circulation size and shown in descending order of frequency.**

Small newspapers	Midsized newspapers	Metro newspapers
Disorganized/poor planning	Out for self	Disorganized/poor planning
Lazy	Poor communicators	Yes men and women
Don't listen	Yes men and women	Inflexible
Out for self	*Disorganized/poor planning	Out for self
Caustic/rude	*Inflexible	Poor communicators
Negative/can't do attitude	Unqualified/inexperienced	Unqualified/inexperienced
Poor communicators	Isolated/inaccessible	Poor news judgment
Inflexible	Technically inadequate/ incompetent	Lazy
Won't take responsibility	Poor people skills	Indifferent
Inconsistent/unfair	Lazy	Arrogant
	*No vision/*Arrogant	

poor people skills.

When the respondents are sorted according to size of newspaper, the issues remain quite similar across the board. Although the response frequency shifts for some of the attributes, they remain quite constant from size to size. But there are some slight differences: Arrogance, for example, appeared on the Top 10 lists of only midsize metro papers, whereas caustic/rude appeared only on the smaller papers' list. This is not to say that no one at small newspapers cited arrogance as a problem in their ranks that no one at a metro paper has ever experienced a rude supervisor, but rather that the frequency rate of responses can place some attributes on the list or remove them.

If there is a single most surprising insight to take from this question of worst managers, it is that everyone—non-supervisors, middle managers and top editors alike—acknowledges there are some lazy middle managers in their ranks. And that is a harsh indictment these days, since everyone also agrees that overwork is the greatest obstacle to editorial excellence. Any manager not carrying his or her fair share not only increases the work burden for others but also stands as a barrier to improving the product. This finding of laziness, coupled with the assertion that there are some incompetents in middle management, suggests some personnel action is necessary.

Fact and Fantasy

Middle managers are in a position of power and they command a certain level of cooperation and deference. But whether that translates into sincere support and respect is another matter entirely.

Asked if newsroom rank and file are generally respectful and supportive of middle management, nearly all top managers answered yes. Only among the metro top editors did any answer no (20 percent of them), although a couple of top leaders at midsize and metro papers said they weren't sure.

As it turns out, the levels of support seem to be somewhat lower than top editors believe (significantly lower at metro papers).

At small newspapers, 62 percent of middle managers said managers are respected and supported; 67 percent of non-supervisors said they are.

At midsize papers, 67 percent of middle managers said managers are respected and supported; 64 percent of non-supervisors agreed.

At metro papers, 63 percent of middle managers said managers are respected and supported; 53 percent of non-supervisors agreed.

Clearly, middle managers as a group have not entirely bought into the don't-get-no-respect billing. Their numbers indicate nothing more than a pretty realistic view of what they're getting, which is something less than universal support and respect, but nothing approaching no respect.



"We understand the difficulties they endure. We're all in the same boat, so we try to be understanding and supportive most of the time," wrote one copy editor, stating a view echoed by many others.

There were, however, some who offered rather severe comments.

"There's a real us-and-them mentality," wrote one metro reporter about the relationship.

"Middle managers are just seen as being in the way of quality journalism," said another.

"They do little to earn respect," wrote another.

More troubling is that even many of the non-supervisors who said yes, middle managers are respected, wrote in such qualifiers as:

"We know how to play the game."

"You learn to put on the right face."

"Yes, we support and respect them. Whatever they say goes.

So it is highly possible that the respect/support numbers are actually a bit lower than reported. And although the numbers from the non-supervisors are not disturbingly low, they warrant some attention. There are many ways their responses might be interpreted.

One is that middle management is a currently popular whipping boy and employees are merely following the trend, a not-unheard-of occurrence, even in newsrooms. Another is that newsroom personnel are inherently skeptical and challenging of authority, and this is merely an extension of that. Another is that non-supervisors have an exceedingly lofty definition of what qualifies as respect. And a final possibility is that they mean exactly what they say—that some have little respect for their bosses.

Although many subordinates indicate high empathy for the awful hours and the many difficulties with which middle managers must contend, there is also, especially at metro and midsize newspapers, a prevailing undercurrent that assuming the mantle of management requires co-opting personal beliefs and shedding professional convictions.

"They are no longer journalists, they're the mouthpieces of upper management," wrote one metro reporter.

"I would never go into management," wrote another. "I believe in doing journalism, and you give that up when you go into management at this place."

"It's amazing how they bury their instinct to think or challenge as soon as they become middle managers," wrote another.

Some of this sentiment against middle managers can probably be traced to the deficient professional skills or behavioral issues previously cited. However, a large measure undoubtedly can be traced to what seems to be a perception among many non-supervisors that middle managers allow themselves to be unduly neutralized, influenced or controlled by the level above them.

Indeed, there are several indications from this survey that many non-supervisors see top management as a culprit.

For example, when asked "What are the key characteristics top leaders look for when hiring or promoting middle managers at your newspaper?" non-supervisors answered with responses like "passivity," "malleability" and "willingness to toe the company line" almost as often as their most frequent answer, which was solid experience. The third most frequently offered answer from non-supervisors was diversity.

Middle managers' three most frequent answers to the same question were solid experience, the ability to fit in with or work

What editors seek when hiring

Top editor's three most frequent responses to the question of what they look for when hiring or promoting middle managers were: Good people skills (an answer mentioned very rarely by middle managers and even less frequently by non-supervisors), solid experience and good mind/ critical thinking ability (a response given by no middle managers or non-supervisors).

Interestingly, what editors say they seek—strong people skills—is evidently not seen by anyone else as a top management priority. Possibly that is because top editors seem to be having less than strong success in this goal. Many of the failings of middle managers cited by top editors, middle managers and non-supervisors alike—such as performance coaching—fall under the general category of people skills.

with other managers and unflappable or calm disposition. Another area in which non-supervisors' frustration with top editors is evident is the issue of editor helpfulness.

Asked whether top editors generally help or hinder middle management, most top editors said they believe they help: They were seven times more likely to say they help (74 percent) than hinder (10 percent), while 16 percent said they weren't sure.

Middle managers and their subordinates were less convinced of the helping nature of top editors. Subordinates expressed a more negative view of the situation than middle managers did. Forty-seven percent of middle managers and 30 percent of non-supervisors said top editors generally help; 25 percent of middle managers and 31 percent of non-supervisors said top editors generally hinder; 28 percent of the middle managers and 39 percent of non-supervisors said they weren't sure, or did not answer the question.

This is an issue that correlates with size. Non-supervisors and middle managers at small newspapers were three times more likely to see top management as helpers than metro employees were. Non-supervisors and middle managers at midsize newspapers were nearly twice as likely to see them as helpers than metro employees. This is probably the result of staff size and relationships forged. At smaller newspapers, where there are fewer staffers, top editors probably would have more regular contact with all levels of the staff and be more aware of and involved in story development, personnel issues and other day-to-day matters right from the beginning. Staff would see their input as ordinary and helpful. At midsize papers, and particularly metros, top editors' involvement may be more sporadic and last minute, leading staffers to be more inclined to regard it, in the words of respondents, as "intrusive," "second-guessing" or "micromanaging things they care about and ignoring things they don't."

Why are middle managers themselves, as a whole, less inclined to see top managers as a hindrance to their work than staffers are? Perhaps middle managers have a more realistic view of the give-and-take nature of hierarchies and believe the accommodations they make are common and customary. Perhaps they are misrepresenting or overemphasizing to their staffs the intrusion level of top editors. Or perhaps, as many reporters suggest, middle managers have been neutralized to the point that they can no longer accurately judge undue pressure by their bosses, so they see things somewhat more positively than non-supervisors do.

Whatever the explanation, there are some real issues relating to the nature and degree of top editors' relationships with middle managers that are probably affecting the way middle managers are perceived by their staffs.

It is possible newsroom staffers require some reality checks about the nature of workplace decision-making, and it is also possible top editors need to examine their own actions and styles.

However, this help-hinder perception is not born exclusively from a notion that top editors are overly controlling or overly involved in middle managers business.

Respondents were asked, "Are middle managers empowered to make decisions about content and hiring, and should they be?" The vast majority from all three levels said they are.

Most of the top editors—92 percent—said their middle managers are empowered.

A smaller percentage of middle managers and non-supervisors believe middle managers are empowered, but even among them empowerment is seen as the rule rather than the exception. Seventy-three percent of the middle managers and 68 percent of the non-supervisors said middle managers are empowered. Ten percent of the middle managers and 15 percent of non-supervisors said they are not.

And 17 percent of both the middle managers and non-supervisors said there is a mixed bag when it comes to manager empowerment at their papers. They gave answers like "some are and some aren't," or "some of the time they're empowered and some of the time they are not" or "the favored sons and daughters are."

Although there is not 100 percent belief among middle managers and non-supervisors that there is empowerment, there is also not 100 percent belief that there should be empowerment. About one-quarter of middle managers and one-third of non-supervisors said middle managers are not empowered, about one-fifth of each group said they should not be empowered, or that they have some reservations about whether they should be or not.

Among non-supervisors, 79 percent said their middle managers should be empowered, 2 percent said they should not be empowered and 19 percent said they aren't sure or that some should be and some should not be. Among middle managers 85 percent said they should be, 1 percent said they should not be and 14 percent said they were not sure. Most of the non-supervisors and middle managers who said middle managers should not be empowered were from metro newspapers. Once again the responses seem to point to some reservations about the capability and reliability of middle managers.

It is interesting that non-supervisors perceive a lower level of empowerment than middle managers, who would, presumably, be able to more accurately judge whether there is empowerment or not. There are at least a couple possible explanations for this.

Middle managers may in fact be empowered and are making decisions, but are attributing the unpopular ones to top editors. Or perhaps middle managers have a lower need for total autonomy than non-supervisors' notions of what qualifies as empowerment. If it is the former, this action could be contributing mightily to the general perception of middle

Editors waffle on empowerment

Virtually all top editors—87 percent—said their middle managers should be empowered; none said they should not be empowered; 13 percent did not answer the question.

However, more than half of the editors who said middle managers should be empowered added such qualifiers as "once they have proven they are making wise judgments," or "within some limits."

manager weakness, and middle managers could increase their stature by taking responsibility for the decisions they make and the actions they take.

Overall, the responses to the questions relating to empowerment, the degree of respect given to middle managers, and top editors helping or hindering middle managers point to a basal and complicated problem. There are clearly differences in definitions, expectations and perceptions. Some of these may be exacerbated by inconsistencies in top editor behavior. Some may have to do with middle managers encouraging or allowing their staffs to form inaccurate assumptions about the interchanges between supervisors and top editors. And some may have to do with unrealistic expectations on the part of non-supervisors.

The subtext that emerges suggests that staffers are experiencing some reservations not only about their bosses' skills and abilities, but also some erosion of trust in their integrity and motivations spurred by what is seen as blind acquiescence to what top editors say or suggest. It is difficult to foresee any of this being remedied in the absence of clarifying middle managers' authority and roles.

The Training Conundrum

The topic of training is a complex one. Few in this study would discourage additional training, but there is a difference of opinion about its ultimate impact and value.

Top editors seem to view training as something of a potential cure—all for many of middle management's shortcomings. There is certainly no denying that proper training can be a potent performance enhancer. Still, those who have been on the receiving end of training the middle managers as well as the subordinates who have been the presumed beneficiaries of it—have a somewhat more skeptical view.

About half of the participants in this survey said there is not sufficient training—regular or sporadic—at their newspapers. This position was consistent across all departments and all sizes of newspapers, although survey participants from non-chain newspapers were much more likely to say there is insufficient training than those who work at newspapers owned by chains.

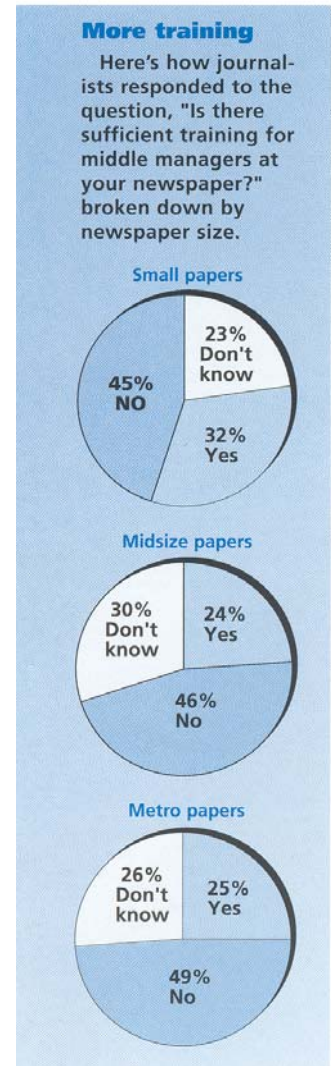
But many of them believe training will not and cannot solve the newsroom problems. Indeed, many of the participants who answered that there is regular training for middle managers also noted that the training is irrelevant, ineffective or ignored. Some of the comments of the non-supervisors:



- “If they do get training, it is poor.”
- "They seem to spend a lot of time off in training meetings, but I've seen little improvement in any of them."
- "It's all about diversity sensitivity and time management and nothing about how to be better journalists or communication, which is the training they really need."
- "They spend so much money trying to teach some of these people to be better managers. And there are some things you just can't teach."
- "How can you train some of these editors to be better at something when they don't see the need to get better at them?"

Managers, too, are sometimes less than enchanted with the training they're getting:

- “We’re trained more how to be politically correct than how to be managers,” said one middle manager at a smaller newspaper.
- "We spend time in rooms with people who don't understand our problems. I think two hours of coaching from my boss would be better than 10 hours with these ‘experts’ they bring in," said a middle manager at a metro newspaper.
- "We're always being scheduled for one thing or another, and we get all revved up about applying



what we've learned, but if the editor hasn't been enlightened along with us, it dies," said a middle manager at a midsize newspaper.

And some middle managers, feeling beleaguered as they struggle to keep up with the daily crush of work, view the time they spend in training as just one more barrier to getting their jobs done.

Most top editors no doubt recognize many of the limitations of training. That notwithstanding, they focused on training throughout this survey. They cited the lack of it as a key reason for sub-par performance among middle managers as well as a significant factor in middle managers not doing excellent work, and they declared more training the single most important route to improving the middle manager corps.

(Middle managers cited training as a factor in job performance and a potential route to improvement, though at a lower level than top editors did. Among non-supervisors, training was not mentioned with sufficient frequency to give it significance in any of the performance questions.)

That middle managers have much to learn is undisputed. And carefully chosen training—in skills and on topics that are relevant to their work—would accomplish much.

The key is providing information and instruction that address existing problems—as identified not only by top editors but also by middle managers and their staffs—and carry forward the priorities and agendas of the organization. Another crucial step is recognizing that training occurs not only during one-hour sessions in closed rooms, but also in impromptu coaching sessions with bosses and peers.

A Future in Doubt

The pool from which to choose the industry's future middle managers will not be huge, and the need for additional middle managers may be somewhat greater than top editors might imagine.

Many of the industry's current middle managers are likely to bail out, if this research group is indicative. Although 58 percent of the survey's middle managers said they expect to remain in management through the end of their newspaper careers, 19 percent are certain they will not and 23 percent are on the fence, not at all sure which way they will go. Those who expect that they will leave newspaper middle management gave such explanations as "it's not worth the stress and aggravation"; "I'll return to writing for personal satisfaction"; "fatigue is the biggest factor"; and "the lack of respect has worn me down."

And among those who are currently not in supervisory positions, there is not an overwhelming urge to advance into management.

More than half of the respondents who are reporters, photographers, copy editors, designers or artists say middle management is a place they never plan to go. Fifty-six percent said they would not, under any circumstances, agree to take a supervisory position. "I'm a journalist, not a corporate toad," or a



variation on that theme, was a pretty typical response, as was "I want a life, and [managers] work too much to have one."

Thirty-seven percent said they might consider taking a supervisory role; the remaining 7 percent were not sure.

The picture is somewhat grimmer among non-supervisors who are 35 and under—the age group in line to be the next generation of managers. Only 30 percent of them would be willing to take a supervisory role. And among those in that age group who have already ventured into supervisory roles at some point, 63 percent said they would never make that journey again, while an additional 30 percent weren't sure.

Still, however bad the reality, the perception is worse. Asked what percentage of non-supervisors in their newsroom would be interested in becoming a manager at some point in the future, there was a rather remarkable consensus among non-supervisors, middle managers and top editors alike. Each group placed the number at about 16 percent.

Yet the real numbers reveal that twice that many are sitting in newsrooms, probably quietly, willing and even hoping to be tapped, despite the difficulties of middle management.

Interest might increase if the lot of middle managers were improved in some way. But in doing that top editors—obviously unable to make wholesale change all at once—will have to decide whether to follow their own instincts or listen to either middle managers or their subordinates.

Asked what single action taken by top editors would most improve the lot of middle managers at their newspapers, there is again a divergence of opinion.

The way middle managers and subordinates see it, top managers should get out of the way and let middle managers do their jobs (ranked No. 1 by middle managers and No. 2 by subordinates) and hire more people (ranked No. 1 by staffers and No. 2 by middle managers). One other solution tied for second

Making it a career

Middle managers who said their rationale for going into middle management was either that they “wanted to help shape coverage and effect change” or that they “like helping others or improving their work,” were four times more likely to say they expect to stay in management through the end of their newspaper careers than those who said they went into it because of the increased salary or because they were invited or pressured by their bosses.

place among middle managers: reshuffle, reassign or redistribute the duties of some of the middle managers.

Among middle managers, the third most frequent response was improve pay scales and, in a tie, offer more training. Non-supervisors' third most frequent response was that top editors should improve the hiring standards and practices for middle managers.

From top editors, the most frequently mentioned strategy for improving the middle manager corps was training, second was improving pay scales, third was hiring more people.

Interestingly, although all the strategies offered by the top editors require channeling money to the problem, many of those suggested by the middle managers and their staffs do not.

So although no single strategy or formula will work in every newsroom, it may not be necessary to spend vast sums of money in order to improve the performance, morale and stature of middle managers. Top editors who seek the advice and counsel of the entire staff will probably uncover some fairly creative and relatively inexpensive ideas for amelioration.

Conclusions

Middle managers seem to regard the jobs they hold far less negatively, in most regards, than the people above them and below them do. That 60 percent of them expect to retire as newsroom managers is remarkable in these times of three-career lives. And their responses throughout this survey indicate what appears to be a realistic appraisal of the upsides and downsides of what they do for a living.

Moreover, there is little whining or buck-passing. In most respects they are taking ownership for the failings of middle managers and not attempting to repaint the canvas in colors more favorable to themselves.

They have, however, become myopic. Like foot soldiers in a battle, they have cranked into survival mode, reacting to those things that need their immediate attention and giving little thought, attention or energy to the next hurdle or the bigger picture. They rarely pull back long enough from the assignment-shoveling mission to think or reason or talk with their staffs or attempt to come up with problem-solving measures that would, in the long run, reduce the burdens they are under. They are focusing on doing the expedient thing to the utter exclusion of all else.

And if they are wrong for doing that, they have accomplices from all other levels of the newsroom. The overworked-middle-manager theme has taken such a preeminent position in newsrooms these days that virtually everyone is dancing to



that music rather than attempting to find reasons and solutions. Yet middle managers themselves, when pressed, come up with all kinds of explanations for their less than perfect performance, and overwork is only one of them.

What appears obvious from this study is that first and foremost the roles and performance expectations of middle managers must be clarified, standards must be set and the means for reaching those standards must be provided.

In the meantime, top editors should be examining the nature and the volume of the work accomplished by middle managers each day. Administrative-duty relief may be necessary, some shifting of responsibilities may be in order and tough personnel decisions may be necessary. There are, no doubt, some middle managers who were promoted and left untended before their time. There are, no doubt, some middle managers who do not have the professional skills or emotional wherewithal to be anyone's boss. And if these deficiencies cannot be readily corrected, alternative jobs should be found.

At the same time, top editors should do everything possible to celebrate the accomplishments and victories of middle managers.

One managing editor at a metro, when asked "What is the single most important thing top editors could do to improve the lot of middle managers?" wrote, "Appreciate them."

He was, as it turned out, the only top editor in this research project to which such a thought occurred.

Zeroing in on Specifics

Much can be learned from the aggregated information shared by the participants in this survey. There are many areas of general consensus, much in the way of similar solutions and several examples of divergent opinion and perception that should illuminate some new routes to problem solving.

However, every newsroom is different. Although many of the overall findings from this study would apply to any individual newsroom, there would be variations important for the top editors and newsroom staff to identify and address. For if one thing is utterly clear from the overall findings, it is top editors in general may be unaware of some of the beliefs and problems swirling about in the ranks below them. This disconnect and other issues are perhaps even more evident when we examine the findings of individual newspapers.

A close look at three randomly selected newspapers illustrates some of the very specific middle manager issues that simmer.

METRO NEWSPAPER

At this respected metro, reporters and managers from the news/metro staff were asked to participate, one of three metro-size papers in which employees involved in city/county/state coverage filled out the research questionnaire.



What is most striking is that middle managers at this newspaper have a noticeably high stated opinion of themselves and their colleagues, however the non-supervisors and top editors have a notably dim view of them.

Here, top management and non-supervisors, responding to the question "How would you rate your middle managers on a score of 1 to 10?" each gave middle managers an average score of 5.5. It is remarkable that top editors and non-supervisors alike gave middle managers an identical average score for two reasons. First, it is among a mere handful of times in the research project that non-supervisors and top editors were in absolute agreement. Second, and perhaps more significant, that score was so much lower than the 7.22 middle managers gave to themselves and their colleagues. Indeed, as it turned out, the 7.22 score was the highest average score from any of the 19 participating papers; the 5.5 score was the second lowest.

Similar variation emerges on the question of competence. Asked what percentage of their middle managers are highly competent, middle managers said 40.63 percent—nearly twice the 23.6 percent average offered by non-supervisors and the 22.5 percent offered by top editors. On the matter of incompetence, non-supervisors said 33.12 percent of middle managers are incompetent, top editors said 22.5 percent and middle managers themselves said 10.63 percent

It is not at all unusual for an individual to inflate his or her own performance. Virtually everyone does. But it is rarer for everyone in a particular segment of the workforce to inflate the entire group's performance. This could happen, generally, for one of two reasons. Perhaps individuals within the group have received insufficient regular constructive criticism to have formed a realistic impression of their performance. Or the group as a whole feels besieged and unfairly victimized, resulting in a defensive posture that prompts it to exaggerate its own contributions to the organization.

Each of these explanations presumes, of course, that the top editors and non-supervisors are right in their assessments and the middle managers are wrong in their assessments of themselves. It is possible that one observing segment—non-supervisors, for example—could be completely off base because of current tensions, a group-think culture in the organization, or any number of other factors that could cause them to misread or misrepresent the reality. However, it is unlikely that two observing groups—those above and below the target group—would offer almost identical assessments that are wrong.

In any case, the issue at this newspaper is not who is right or wrong. But there clearly is a need to examine why there is such a

Perception gap

The average scores given middle managers at this metro newspaper show the managers generally rate their skills higher than either those above or below them do.

	Non-Supervisors	Middle managers	Top editors
Line editing	5.61	7.10	6.00
Interpersonal skills	4.90	6.22	5.50
Communication	4.77	5.62	6.00
Commitment to journalism	4.75	8.66	8.50
Administering performance reviews	4.82	4.42	4.50
Performance coaching	3.72	4.14	4.50
Clarity of vision	4.00	5.10	4.50
News judgment	6.44	8.00	6.50
Feedback	4.50	5.62	4.50
Improves stories	5.00	6.75	6.00
Story ideas	4.82	6.62	6.00

significant variation and attempt to address that issue.

Responses from the three groups regarding middle managers' performance on 11 supervisory skills also show variation.

In eight categories, the middle managers' average scores for themselves and their colleagues were 1.1 points or more higher than the average scores given them by non-supervisors. (The normal difference at other newspapers was .3 to .75 point; and when there were categories in which there was higher variation, the average number of categories in which this was the case was four.) The high-variation categories included line editing, interpersonal skills, commitment to journalism, clarity of vision, news judgment, feedback, improves stories and story ideas.

Top editors had a higher view of middle managers, and one that was closer to middle managers' views of themselves. Although top editors gave middle managers lower scores in eight categories than middle managers gave themselves, the variation was generally quite small, and only in three categories—line editing, news judgment and feedback—did the editors' scores differ by 1.1 points or more from the middle managers' scores.

Top editors gave middle managers slightly higher scores than middle managers gave themselves in three categories—communication, performance reviews and performance coaching—which may suggest top editors have inflated impressions based on insufficient awareness.

What may be most noteworthy from the 11 individual skills' averages is that middle managers seem to think they are better than both those above them and those below them believe them to be in the areas of news judgment, line editing and feedback. So these are areas that probably need to be directly addressed and improved.

Meanwhile, there are some areas—commitment to the principles of journalism, improving stories and coming up with story ideas—in which the non-supervisors' views of their managers is substantially lower than top editors' views. This may be because the non-supervisors are an uncommonly exasperated or sour lot who are displacing much of their frustration on middle managers, or it may be an accurate assessment about which top editors are insufficiently informed. In either event, the disparity bears discussion that should highlight some of the greater issues.

These responses, as well as some others, suggest this may be a newspaper—like many others—where middle management is viewed as a cloistered territory quite distant and apart from the rest of the newsroom. It is a territory about which there seems to be much confusion and consternation relating to its level of authority and its relationship with the top echelon.

Asked what factors keep middle managers from being consistently excellent, non-supervisors cited "they are micromanaged" and "inexperience" most often, middle managers said "lack of support from above, too much work, and interference from above" most often, and top management said "too much work" and "don't have or take authority."

Yet, for all the talk about interference and micromanaging, non-supervisors and middle managers are clearly conflicted about what level of authority middle managers there should have. On the question of whether middle managers are empowered—and whether or not they should be—50 percent of non-supervisors said no, they are not. Nearly that many—40 percent—said either that they should not be or that they are not sure if they should be. Of middle managers, 60 percent said middle managers are not empowered and 60 percent said they should not be or that they're not sure if they should be. And among top editors, all said "it varies" when asked if managers

are empowered, and the unanimous answer to whether they should be was "it depends" (or words to that effect).

Asked whether upper management helps or hinders middle managers, 40 percent of non-supervisors and 44 percent of middle managers said hinders, 11 percent of non-supervisors and 33 percent of middle managers said helps. And the remainder in each of those two job categories said they aren't sure. All top editors said they were not sure.

So a significant number of people at all levels of this newspaper indicate some doubt about the leadership/decision-

Do top editors exert too much control?

The belief among non-supervisors that upper management is excessively controlling is evidenced, among other things, when they identify what they believe are the key characteristics top management seeks in middle managers.

Forty-eight percent of reporters who gave answers like "malleability," "someone who won't question them," "yes men," "the ability to believe the earth is flat if upper management says so" and "personal connections with upper management."

Interestingly, no middle manager at this paper gave a similar answer. Moreover, top editors at this newspaper listed "yes men/women" or "unwillingness to confront or take a stand" as characteristics that contribute to poor performance among middle managers.

This malleability perception among non-supervisors is one that is not shared by middle management, and one that is direct conflict with what top editors say they hold as a key value.

making capabilities of their middle managers. The next logical question would be: Does this doubt derive from middle managers having made unwise decisions in the past, or because their decision-making abilities have not been tested?

In the end, the non-supervisors in this newsroom have pretty strong reservations about their supervisors' competencies and job performance. This is coupled with a strong feeling that upper management is too intrusive and authoritative, and complicated by a belief that their managers aren't capable of taking much more authority. And middle managers themselves say they are very competent but over-controlled; yet they don't express much confidence in the middle management corp's judgment if they were given more authority, either.

Until the issues of authority, empowerment and top editor involvement are sorted out and everyone has similar expectations, it is unlikely that any of the other areas of disagreement will inch closer to something approaching consensus. And the possibility of additional trickle-down impact is likely. For example, this newspaper has the smallest percentage of non-supervisors interested in promotion to middle management of any newspaper in the research project.

MIDSIZE NEWSPAPER

At this newspaper, there is strong agreement between top and middle management as to the overall state of middle management, and these two groups see things more positively than non-supervisors do.

Top editors and middle managers gave an identical average score—7.33—to middle managers. The non-supervisors gave a lower 5.81.

On the competence issue as well, top editors and middle managers gave much higher scores to middle managers than non-supervisors did. Non-supervisors said only 25 percent of middle managers are highly competent, while middle managers set the figure at 54 percent and top editors at 43 percent. On incompetence, non-supervisors said 29 percent of middle managers fall into that category, middle managers said 17.5 percent and top editors said 10 percent.

When the scores on middle managers' performance in 11 specific supervisory skills are examined, there is agreement more typical of the study between non-supervisors and middle managers. In eight of the 11 categories, there is less than one point difference between the average scores given by non-supervisors and middle managers, and in six of those there is less than a half point difference.

All three categories of newsroom personnel—non-supervisors, middle managers and top editors alike—gave low marks to middle managers in the areas of performance coaching, performance reviews and story ideas.

But top editors gave somewhat higher scores to middle managers than either middle managers or non-supervisors did in four categories: improves stories, performance coaching, feedback and news judgment. This pattern suggests that these are areas that could experience performance falloff in the future, since it appears the staff's standards and expectations may be higher than those of the top editors.

Moreover, the top editors gave substantially higher scores than either middle managers or non-supervisors gave in the areas of commitment to journalism and clarity of vision. When disparity this great exists between the top editors' perceptions and the perceptions of both middle managers and their staffs, it may be assumed one of two things is happening. Either there is an information gap between what top editors assume is happening and what other staffers are certain is happening, or

Raising the bar

The possibility that the staff perceives it has higher standards for itself than the editor has for it is evidenced by answers to the question “What is the single most important thing top management could do to improve middle management?”

Nearly 50 percent of non-supervisors said “raise the standards” or “demand better journalism.” This response rate far surpassed the level to which similar answers were given at other newspapers.

there is a significant disparity in what various levels believe qualifies as average vs. strong performance.

The almost across-the-board tendency for top editors to rate middle managers much higher than not only the non-supervisors but also, in many cases, the middle managers themselves did, suggests a few possibilities.

One possibility is that top management here is quite closely connected to middle management but may have insufficient contact with non-supervisors to identify some of the problems

Different views of skills

The average scores given to middle managers at this midsize newspaper indicate the large disparity between top editor's perceptions and everyone else's perceptions of middle manager's skills in a number of areas.

	Non-Supervisors	Middle managers	Top editors
Line editing	6.23	6.00	7.00
Interpersonal skills	6.35	6.57	7.00
Communication	5.85	6.14	6.33
Commitment to journalism	5.65	7.57	9.60
Administering performance reviews	4.00	5.00	4.00
Performance coaching	4.00	4.10	5.60
Clarity of vision	3.94	4.70	7.00
News judgment	5.55	7.14	8.00
Feedback	4.73	5.28	6.00
Improves stories	5.00	5.12	6.66
Story ideas	4.50	4.16	6.33

and issues that exist.

Another is that top management has ordered some fundamental changes in the news process and is satisfied with the steps managers are taking, but non-supervisors are unaware or unaccepting of this and the low grades given middle managers represent misdirected frustration.

Yet a third is that the top editors are engaging in confirmation bias. That is, top editors are rating middle managers high because they picked and promoted these managers. It's a common phenomenon for supervisors to highly rate people they have promoted, thus unconsciously confirming their own personnel decisions.

Non-supervisors' substantially more negative views are evidenced through other findings. For example, on the question of whether the newspaper's middle managers are better or worse today than five years ago, 57 percent of non-supervisors said worse, while 55 percent of the middle managers and all of the top editors said better. (Thirty percent of middle managers were not sure or said there had been no change.)

The middle managers seem acutely aware of the sandwich in which they find themselves. Sixty-six percent of the middle managers said the job of being a middle manager is worse now than five years ago (a position echoed by 81 percent of the non-supervisors), while 66 percent of the top editors said better. At only two other newspapers in this survey—both metros—was the percentage of people saying the job is worse greater.

At this newspaper, too, top management is seen by many as a contributor to the problems and perceptions relating to middle managers. When asked whether top editors help or hinder middle managers, 66 percent of the top editors said help. However, 50 percent of non-supervisors said they hinder (20 percent said help; the rest weren't sure). And 45 percent of middle managers said hinder (35 percent said help and the rest weren't sure).

Wanted: Strong managers

A clear pattern at this newspaper is a belief among non-supervisors and to a slightly lesser degree among middle managers that some of the trouble among middle management can be traced to a group disability: flaccid backbone

To a much higher degree than at all but one other newspaper, words such as “non-aggressive,” “wishy-washy,” “fearful,” “stuck-ups,” “sycophants,” “too compliant” appeared when they were asked to identify the factors that lead to sub-par performance or when identifying the characteristics of the worst middle managers.

But the issue of authority here is somewhat less decidedly confusing than at the metro paper—at least from the non-supervisors' perspective. On the question of whether middle managers are empowered, 100 percent of top management said yes they are and they should be. Sixty percent of the non-supervisors agreed (25 percent said no; the rest weren't sure), and 14 percent of the middle managers agreed (a whopping 86 percent weren't sure). As to whether they should be empowered, 80 percent of middle managers said yes; 20 percent said no. Sixty percent of the non-supervisors said yes, while 40 percent said they weren't sure.

This is a newsroom in need of serious discussions about standards and expectations, and one where top editors must develop greater presence and communication with the rank and file.

SMALL NEWSPAPER

This is a newsroom in which the non-supervisors' and middle managers' assessments are very similar, and those assessments are somewhat more positive than some of the assessments by the top editor.

It is clear throughout the survey that this is an editor with high standards. It is just as clear that the staff does not feel battered or belittled by this, but rather comes away with what is probably a balanced view of its own strengths and weaknesses, and a willingness to try to achieve the top editor's goals. This is evidenced, for example, by the responses to the question of whether top editors help or hinder middle management. All but three of the respondents—all non-supervisors—said top management helps.

On the overall grading of the middle managers, non-supervisors gave an average of 6.57 and middle managers gave a 7.4, while the top editor placed it at 4.

And there was quite strong agreement among all levels as to the performance of middle managers on 11 supervisory skills.

Although the middle managers generally gave themselves slightly higher scores than others gave them, there is a difference of less than one point in all but three categories.

A newsroom in agreement

With only a couple of exceptions, the average scores at this small newspaper show quite strong agreement among all levels as to the performance of middle managers.

	Non-Supervisors	Middle managers	Top editors
Line editing	6.85	8.50	4.00
Interpersonal skills	6.80	6.00	5.00
Communication	6.13	5.20	5.00
Commitment to journalism	8.52	7.60	8.00
Performance reviews	4.70	5.00	5.00
Performance coaching	4.70	5.20	5.00
Clarity of vision	5.80	7.20	5.00
News judgment	7.28	8.20	8.00
Feedback	5.55	6.20	5.00
Improves stories	6.58	6.40	7.00
Story ideas	6.00	7.00	5.00

Non-supervisors, middle managers and the top editor agreed that middle manager weaknesses are most severe in the areas of communication, administering performance reviews, performance coaching and feedback, though the top editor added line editing and story ideas to his list of lowest scores.

The two areas in which the middle managers may have been inflating their performance were in line editing and in clarity of vision—areas in which the top editor and staffers alike agree there is less than solid performance. This would suggest that middle managers have not been sent the message—or they have not received the message that more is expected in these two areas.

Top management should reiterate to middle managers the need to improve performance in the areas in which they already know they are lacking. In addition, the top editor should devise strategies for improving manager performance in the areas of line editing and vision, skills about which middle managers seem unclear on their actual performance.

There is also among middle managers a somewhat elevated notion of the numbers of highly competent editors in their ranks: non-supervisors said 34 percent, middle managers said 47 percent and the top editor said 28 percent. Incompetents comprise 19 percent, according to non-supervisors, 11 percent according to middle managers and none according to the top editor.

Also on the issue of competence, there is a big difference of opinion relating to the ages and origins of the most competent middle managers. Thirty-eight percent of non-supervisors said outside hires are more competent (an equal percentage said there is no difference). Virtually all middle managers said competence does not correlate to whether they were inside promotions or outside hires. The top editor said inside promotions are the most competent.

Meanwhile, 53 percent of subordinates said under-40 managers are more competent. Most middle managers said age is irrelevant in their newsroom. And the top editor said the over-40 editors are more competent.

The editor would do well to examine what it is about the younger outside hires that prompted the rank and file to state a preference for them. It may be no more than an age-cohort issue coupled with the common belief that any import is superior to the local product that prompted so many non-supervisors to take these positions. Or it may be that outside hires bring skills or characteristics prized by the staff, which the editor should identify and help the people promoted from within to develop.

On the issue of what prevents middle managers from doing consistently excellent work, non-supervisors' three-way tie focused on too much work, too limited resources and too many meetings. Middle managers point the finger of blame at too limited resources. And the top editor believes it emanates from too little training.

If there is one area in which the agreement of the non-supervisors and middle managers alike is most surprising, it is their solution for improving the lot of middle management. Asked to identify the single most important thing top management could do to improve the management corps, the most frequently offered answer among non-supervisors was "fire some of the managers," and middle managers answered "fire some people" (which may have meant don't limit the firing to managers).

The most extreme measure, always distasteful and never considered blithely by any editor, may or may not be a reasonable solution in this situation. However, among the staff there is a clear belief that some of the people who are working in this newsroom have no business working there. Non-supervisors and middle managers agree that from 11 percent to 19 percent of the middle managers are incompetent-and they are eager for the

top editor to take some action. At a minimum some intervention to improve under-performers should be taken.

CONCLUSION

There is one thing the three newspapers have in common and it is something they share with all other newspapers: There are problems and issues with middle management and they are not always simple or easy to identify.

No top editor can prevent that, and none can make totally correct assumptions about the problems' precise origins, nature or most appropriate solutions. Only through a great deal of communication with all levels of the newsroom can editors hope to zero in on many of the issues and come up with solutions that will have a positive impact.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sharon L. Peters spent 23 years in the newspaper business as a reporter, assigning editor and managing editor before earning a doctorate in organization development and starting her own consulting business. This is her second monograph for NMC. Her first, *In Their Prime: Motivating Senior Reporters*, published in 1997, examined the commonalties among aging reporters who are still at the top of their game. Peters lives in Silverthorne, Colorado.

ABOUT NMC

NMC, Northwestern University Media Management Center, is affiliated with the Kellogg Graduate School of Management and the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. It was founded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and is supported by Knight and the Robert R. McCormick Tribune Foundation and through projects with media companies. NMC offers an array of on-campus and company-specific programs for executive education and conducts and funds research in media industry issues. It also forms cooperative partnerships with media companies for training, development and applied research. To learn more about NMC and its programs, call Director John Lavine at 847.491.4900.