Middle Managers Feel the Least Psychological Safety at Work

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When it comes to workplace candor, most leaders focus on helping frontline employees feel safe to speak up—the concept Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson popularized as team psychological safety. The phrase refers to the belief that you won't be punished or humiliated for admitting a mistake or raising a concern, and over the past quarter century, it's become a staple of leadership playbooks and organizational culture initiatives.

Nevertheless, our latest research revealed a surprising blind spot: Middle managers feel the least psychologically safe in their organizations, even less than their own team members.

In an ongoing global study of 1,160 managers across industries including services, finance, manufacturing, and utilities, most from companies with more than 50,000 employees, we found that middle managers scored 68.0 out of 100 on psychological safety, compared with 72.7 for C-suite executives—a 4.7-point gap. And when we compared middle managers with their own direct reports, the difference persisted: Their followers scored 4.2 points higher on psychological safety.

The lowest scores came from newly promoted middle managers—those in their roles less than three years—who reported nearly five points lower psychological safety than more seasoned peers, suggesting a steep and often lonely adjustment period.

This finding isn't just interesting—it's consequential. Middle managers are the linchpin between strategy and execution—the organization's central nervous system. They sense problems, relay critical signals, and coordinate responses that keep the enterprise agile. When they don't feel safe to voice concerns or admit mistakes, that feedback loop breaks. Vital information never reaches the top, problems remain undiagnosed, and the whole system falters, stumbles, and risks falling behind.

Low psychological safety at the middle level creates a ripple effect throughout the organization, quietly undermining performance. Here are some of the specific ways this plays out:

- **Error blindness at the top.** Afraid of the career risk that comes with admitting failure, middle managers often filter bad news before it reaches senior executives. Leaders end up in "good news bubbles," where early warning signs of trouble are muffled or hidden.
- **Fallibility gap.** When middle managers don't model openness about their own mistakes, their teams follow suit, staying quiet about errors and missed opportunities. The result is a culture where problems are patched over, not addressed.
- **Innovation slowdown.** Experimentation often comes with missteps. But when managers fear the consequences of failed ideas, creative problem-solving grinds to a halt.
- **Long-term performance erosion.** Over time, avoiding mistakes means avoiding the hard conversations that fuel learning and adaptation, especially in today's volatile markets.

Our data and interviews point to five primary reasons the people between the C-suite and the front line feel the lowest sense of psychological safety:

The CEO of a mid-sized German company recently told us he suspects that the wrong people are being promoted to middle management. Those he worked with, he said, seemed too timid in meetings and failed to contribute as expected. He believed the solution lay in better selection processes. The real issue, however, wasn't *who* was promoted but the way they suddenly feel accountable. The moment a manager steps up into the middle tier, their perceived risk profile changes. With greater visibility and higher stakes, they suddenly have more to lose. The fear of damaging their reputation or jeopardizing their career progress makes them risk averse. Many middle managers learn, often by watching others, that admitting mistakes can make them scapegoats or even cost them their jobs.

What to do: Redesign accountability systems to encourage constructive risk-taking. Replace blanket blame with "justified accountability"—holding people responsible for repeated negligence but treating honest mistakes as learning opportunities. Consider whether dismissing or sanctioning a manager after a failure is truly justified, especially if they or their teams have just learned a valuable lesson.

Senior leaders may unknowingly reinforce the silence of middle managers. Often, the more senior you are, the fewer mistakes you tend to hear and see—and the more you expect flawless execution. On the frontline things are different; there managers are often confronted with errors and mistakes. Without regular modelling fallibility from the C-suite, middle managers may assume that portraying perfection is the price of survival.

What to do: Be open as a senior leader. Share your own mistakes and what you learned from them. When working with middle managers, ask probing but non-judgmental questions such as, "What's not going as expected?" rather than "Why is this going wrong?" Subtle shifts in language and tone can help boost psychological safety and make it easier for middle managers to share candid updates.

Organizational systems often reinforce the myth of flawless performance. Few companies have mechanisms—such as Spotify's open failure platforms that allows individuals or whole teams to openly share their errors and failures—that enable learning across departments and destigmatize errors and failures. Without such structures, middle managers assume that perfection is expected and avoid discussing negative events.

What to do: Promote platforms for sharing near misses—that is, events where an error with significant consequences was recognized and corrected in time—as well as errors and failures. You'll find a good example in aviation, where open error reporting is the norm as a result of systematic training. The chief pilot of a major European airline shared that he reminds his crew before each flight: "Watch out, I will make mistakes, and when you see one, it is your task to speak up on time." The response to an error notification is a neutral "Thank you," and a report is filed so others can learn from the mistake.

Frontline employees often have teams for camaraderie and peer support; senior executives have leadership forums and board interactions. Middle managers, by contrast, often work in isolation, with few peers they can confide in when they face problems. They're squeezed both from above and below— absorbing pressure and anxiety from both senior leaders and frontline staff—without an outlet for support. In today's climate of global volatility, hybrid work, and AI-driven workplace disruption, that isolation is even more taxing.

What to do: Create dedicated communities of practice for middle managers to exchange ideas, share challenges, and seek advice through mechanisms such as peer coaching. Peer support isn't a luxury—it's a safeguard against burnout, disengagement, and silence.

As noted, our data shows that newly promoted middle managers—those in their roles less than three years—have the lowest psychological safety of all. The leap from frontline or lower-level management to the middle tier is steep: New middle managers shift from leading frontline employees to leading other leaders, which demands new leadership skills. Furthermore, they are suddenly accountable for broader business results, visible to senior leaders, and expected to deliver results fast. At the same time, they're still learning the unspoken rules of the new level including what kind of candor is safe. The combination of high scrutiny and low certainty can make early missteps feel career-ending, encouraging silence just when honest reflection is most needed.

What to do: Treat transitions into middle management as a developmental phase, not an instant upgrade. Pair new middle managers with experienced mentors who model openness about errors and failures. Build "failure literacy" into onboarding so managers learn to frame setbacks as growth, not weakness—strengthening, rather than threatening, their credibility. And create early opportunities for them to surface challenges without penalty: a simple "first 100 days" learning review can go a long way in normalizing candor.

Most organizations talk about empowering the middle by giving them tools, resources, and authority. But empowerment is hollow without psychological safety. If your middle managers can't admit when something is going wrong, your organization will learn too slowly and act too late.

The good news is that the solutions are within reach: Rather than simply seeking a better selection process for middle managers, organizations can focus on creating the right conditions—modeling vulnerability from the top, designing organizational systems that reward learning, and providing middle managers with genuine support networks.

When the middle layer can sense and transmit signals without fear, the entire enterprise moves with agility and purpose. When it can't, even the best strategies falter. Strengthening it isn't optional; it's the line between an organization that adapts in time and one that quietly slips behind.