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Column: If your managers are AWOL, leading from the middle becomes vital

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Real Life Leadership

Question: Our office has gone through a lot of change over the past couple of years. New managers are brought in, stay a few months and then are replaced. This revolving door makes it very hard on us. We feel we need to have a better grasp on how to operate our office in the midst of such chaos.

Answer: Your office needs to learn to lead from the middle. You are caught, like so many people, between the responsibilities of your position in the company, the expectations of your bosses, the people who work with you and your customers. Often these are in conflict with one another. You and your colleagues have to find a way to lead your way out.

What does it mean to lead when you are not in a leadership position?

You are not the CEO, so you are not responsible for the long-term planning of the company. You are not the office manager, so you are not responsible for the performance of the people who work with you. Every position within an organization comes with a set of boundaries. Venture beyond them, and problems develop.

To lead, therefore, is not to take on someone else's responsibility. To lead is to understand, within the boundaries of your job, how you can create a higher level of impact. This description may sound as if you are to just do the best job you can. But while that is a good idea, it is not what leadership is.

Leadership begins with personal initiative. It is seeing something that needs to be done that will make a difference and taking the action to do it. It could be addressing the need of a co-worker, communicating with a customer how to more creatively resolve a problem or finding a different way to accomplish a task that saves time and money. It could be taking the responsibility to coordinate the office's involvement in a charitable event.

The key to understanding leadership is that it is action that is taken to achieve a desired impact. By making a difference, something is changing for the better. This is what effective leaders do.

To lead from the middle requires that you build trust and confidence in your operation. When you lead to create trust, people know that when you say you'll do something, you'll do it. When you are trustworthy, openness and authenticity matter in your relationships with co-workers and customers. Creating confidence means that people believe that you are capable of doing what you say you will do. It is a question of competence.

Leaders focus on making a difference. They do so by being people of trust and confidence in action.

Do this, and your office will benefit greatly.

This is the opinion of Ed Brenegar, president of the Community of Leadership, a leadership development and transition planning consultancy. He writes a blog at <http://edbrenegar.typepad.com>.

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