



Middle Managers: Engaging and Enrolling the Biggest Roadblock to Diversity and Inclusion

by Members of The Conference Board Business Diversity Council

Diversity practitioners, by definition, challenge the status quo, potentially putting them at direct odds with middle managers who are often more concerned with preserving the status quo.

Ah, the middle managers conundrum. The grassroots are energized, the executives have seen the light, and the top-down and bottom-up momentum comes to a screeching halt right in the middle girth of most organizations. The middle-management layer seemingly douses the spreading diversity fire, smothering it through inertia rather than outright opposition.

How can you engage middle management into an agile, collective embrace of diversity initiatives? To start, diversity practitioners need to understand the position of the middle managers. Executives are about long-term strategy. Grassroots employees are about immediate, individual, personal, and idealistic issues. Although often involved in executing future strategies and change management, middle managers are more about preserving the status quo. They're rewarded for maintaining current results.

Editor's Note: This piece is intended to generate dialogue around diversity and middle management – a population that is numerically one of the largest in organizations and, for practical purposes, one of the most important to engage and enroll in corporate diversity. The opinions and ideas in this report are a combination, but not a consensus, of the opinions and ideas of the contributors. It is hoped that this report will provide diversity practitioners with one set of tools to further their work, generate conversation, and lead to future reports that further explore this and other diversity challenges.



Diversity practitioners, by definition, challenge the status quo, potentially putting them at direct odds with middle managers. (The same can be said of HR and diversity, where HR is rewarded for keeping the boat from rocking.) At the same time, middle managers are a key to the work diversity practitioners are carrying out within their organizations in hiring, development, and promotion decisions. What's more, middle managers sometimes become a roadblock to inclusion initiatives such as when they fail to support their employees' efforts to participate in affinity group programs.

So, how do diversity practitioners—who may be at odds with what middle managers are motivated to focus on—engage them to carry out the requested and essential work?

Middle Manager Engagement in Diversity (MMED) is, at its core, a change-management process. So, to help orchestrate the approach, let's first define the current state and the desired state.

Current State of MMED

If the current state of MMED were reported on by the press, what headlines would we see?

'Diversity scares me,' say middle managers

The call to diversity: Overworked group asked to do more with less

'Feel Good' program added to overflowing plate

'Diversity = Affirmative Action + Quotas,' say middle managers

It ain't broke, so don't fix it—company hits earnings again!

'Diversity takes time,' caution middle managers

Middle managers feel blamed for leaders' lack of progress in diversity

Middle managers pass the buck: 'Diversity is an HR issue!'

Middle managers fear risk of failure too high to hire diverse candidates

'Diverse candidates can't fill specialized needs,' declare middle managers

Middle managers fight back: 'I don't have time to source diverse candidates'

Middle managers take stand: 'Diversity doesn't apply to us'

'Sure, diversity is important—but we've got a business to run,' say middle managers

It's clear that there are myriad barriers to engaging middle managers. Beneath the headlines are layers of complexity, including a lack of understanding for the business case for diversity, competing priorities, time pressures, legitimate questions about how they'll be rewarded for their efforts, measurability, lack of authority to make much of a difference, and a sense that they're at the mercy of the candidates recruiters provide them.

We believe there are ways through these barriers. But before exploring those, let's paint a picture of what a successful MMED would look like.

Desired State of MMED

What might the headlines be if middle managers really got it?

'Diversity shows business value, greater innovation,' declare middle managers

Study shows candidates prefer diverse companies—hiring managers lead the way by example

'My team is incredible, people come from all different walks of life to make great decisions': A profile of a middle manager who got it

'Diversity is the link to productivity improvements,' say middle managers

Achieving great results—diversity really makes a difference!

Managers take the lead on diversity action planning

Glass ceiling crashes—middle managers on the front lines of making it happen

Managers take proactive stand to further diversity efforts

Companies experiencing industry-low turnover—success attributed to unprecedented diversity/middle manager partnerships

Increase in ethnic market penetration attributed to successful diversity efforts at the middle-management level

It's clear that we can't have diversity breakthrough without middle management engagement. The corollary to this is that if we can achieve middle management engagement, we'll see the very results we're striving for. Sure, there's the accountability thing, but the key is for middle managers to see what's in it for them and the overall business and then be equipped to carry out the work. Key to winning them over is demonstrating that diversity and inclusion will contribute to goals such as increased capacity, better solutions for business challenges, employee engagement/ownership (willing to give their very best for their companies), innovative ideas, reduced turnover, and the ability to resolve complex business issues.

So what can be done today to achieve the desired state headlines?

A Friendly Frontal Assault on Middle Managers

Here's a five-phased process for getting middle managers effectively involved in the diversity process. If it looks like a change-management process, it is. To turn the middle manager ship around requires an organizational, systemic approach—and there's no one mother-of-all-tactics that will cause the breakthrough. Better to follow this multi-phased process—and make sure you're partnering with HR. The five phases are:

- Influence
- Enroll
- Equip
- Monitor
- Partner

Influence

Let's begin with our (not *Webster's*) definition of the verb "influence."

influence v. to cause someone to do something he or she would not otherwise have done if left to his or her own devices

No change can begin without getting key players interested in seeing the change happen. So how do we convince these dyed-in-the-wool custodians of the status quo that the diversity journey, the road less traveled, will reap rewards for them?

It's tempting to begin with the business case, but the reality is that middle managers hear business cases every time they walk down the hallway. They've seen them come and go, with most evaporating under the pressures of day-to-day business realities. Realistically, they're not responsible for making the business case. They're about executing against it once the senior leaders have embraced and sponsored it. So, they can't be convinced through the business case as the first thing. What needs to happen first is exerting pressure: executive, grass-roots, and peer pressure.

In this influence stage, compared to the ones that follow, programs will be less systemic and more ad hoc and high profile in nature.

Strategy: Exert Executive Pressure

Once your senior leaders are engaged (there are already well-documented best practices on how to win their support), use them as diversity champions to gain middle management buy-in.

Programs

Use executives as key levers. Have senior leadership make a forceful case and ask that middle managers get involved. Follow up with open forums that encourage direct dialogue between middle management and executive leaders. Too often it's the executive leaders who give the "Go for it!" message to the chief diversity Office and Senior Vice President of Human Resources. They, in turn, may be carrying the ball more than they should in taking the message to middle management. Get executive leaders to carry the banner of diversity deeper into the organization. Have executive leaders model the behaviors they want from middle management, such as attending diversity training and mentoring diverse employees.

Strategy: Exert Grassroots Pressure

Strong affinity groups and their activities get noticed — especially when senior leaders show up and endorse them. Grassroots affinity groups are particularly effective because they provide an amplified voice for their constituents who otherwise would not be heard over the mainstream workforce's day-to-day din. When these affinity groups are effectively led and address relevant business issues, their very presence exerts pressure to be noticed by middle managers. The result? Their employees end up participating directly and/or other employees start to ask questions about these groups.

Programs

Challenge and empower affinity groups to ground their efforts in business-relevant issues. Ensure their programs and marketing have broad appeal beyond their direct constituency by addressing broad-based business issues or employee needs such as career development. Encourage affinity group members to invite their managers to events. Partner with HR to embed leadership of affinity groups into employees' official development plans.

Strategy: Exert Peer Pressure

In the business world, a little competition goes a long way. Find a highly-respected manager who is ready to be an early adapter/champion and ensure he or she gets high-profile visibility for his or her diversity commitment. Go through that person to influence other managers, particularly through manager forums.

Programs

- Create a high-profile award that recognizes manager leadership in diversity and inclusion and is consistent with the company's recognition philosophy.
- Create a road show for managers that is co-led by senior leaders, early adapter managers, and the CDO.
- Create a diversity champion network among middle managers and elicit their ideas for reaching out to their peers.
- Use your corporate intranet to profile managers who get it.

Enroll

Enrolling is getting managers to say, "Sign me up." This means they want to be change agents in the process. While the "influence" phase is about identifying the vanguard of managers who will help move diversity through the organization, the "enroll" phase is about getting the fence sitters onboard. While early adapters are comfortable with ambiguity about next steps, fence-sitters need to have a fleshed-out process. This enables them to see that not only is this a good idea with highly visible sponsorship, but there's actually a game plan they can plug into.

Strategy: Get Them Personally Involved in a Programmatic Way

The work must be internalized by middle managers. Don't allow them to sit on the sidelines and watch others do the work (which they can then criticize, without having any skin in the game). It's essential to find ways for middle managers to be engaged directly in the issues and the work.

Programs

- Enhance education and awareness through relationships. For example, use reciprocal mentoring with someone culturally different (for instance, a high-potential person of color paired with a white male) promotes learning about the implications of these cultural differences.
- Provide “Mental Model Shift” classroom and experiential training. Scholars say mental models are created by past experiences, media, and other messages we receive, and act as filters through which we respond to the world and often limit an individual's thinking about a specific issue.
- Encourage middle managers to participate in local diversity councils.
- Have middle managers participate in diversity events as a speaker, panelist, or host.
- Require all affinity groups to have executive sponsors that come out of the middle management ranks. The best way to gain support is to expose people to areas formerly unfamiliar to them and provide them with a specific role to play.

Strategy: Give Them a Simple Roadmap

Make people feel competent, empowered, and capable by showing them the first easy steps.

Programs

Give them a detailed plan—a how-to guide that provides them with a checklist and sources for information and resources, a list of actionable items, and a calendar of topics by month with ideas for discussion.

Strategy: Reward the Champions

Yes, this was used in the “influence” stage, but it is key to make this a systemic practice. In this phase, the reward may not be as visible in terms of public recognition. However, managers should see tangible evidence that their commitment and involvement in diversity are noticed and valued when it comes to pay and promotions.

Programs

- Tie financial rewards to their performance and development plans. The more it's aligned to goals stemming from the top, the better.
- Recognize managers by putting role model awards on the corporate intranet.

Equip

“OK, I get it now,” middle managers will be saying at this stage. “But give me the tools I need do the work.” Fair enough.

Strategy: Add New Diversity Competency/Performance Expectations for Managers

To make diversity sustainable, one of the keys is to embed it into the performance management system and leadership competencies that will be evaluated through a 360 process.

Programs

- Focus on the competencies of diversity execution, inclusive behavior, and cross-cultural competence.
- Offer training to develop these competencies.
- Take away the fear of being wrong. Through role-plays, actors can be more prescriptive on what activities support diversity and inclusion.
- Provide a robust toolkit on the observable behaviors for each of the competencies and ideas for how to develop them.
- Include cultural competence as a component of an interview skills workshop to enhance managers' ability to connect with potential diverse candidates and ensure they hire the best talent.
- Conduct a 360-degree feedback process to gain input and observations on inclusive behaviors.

Strategy: Give Them the Data

While this is also part of the “monitor” phase that follows the “equip” stage, getting data into middle managers' hands is essential. A common and legitimate complaint on the part of middle managers is that they don't know the score. “Where are we, and where should we be?” they ask. They're used to getting data on a regular basis on inventory, productivity, and response times and are expected to monitor these regularly and take necessary corrective action. Diversity should be no different.

Programs

- Perform quarterly reviews of how the data is analyzed. What “we” look like; what “you” look like; what “you” could look like; what “you” will look like.
- Baseline/equalizing [TEAM: Can someone elaborate on what this is?]
- Use employee satisfaction surveys to identify areas where diversity resources could be used to help resolve what would otherwise be identified as HR or general organization issues. (When you start to dive deeper, there are usually elements of a lack of inclusion, respect, poor development of diverse talent, etc.)
- Be transparent about how goals are set and measured.

Strategy: Provide Middle Managers with Diversity Coaching and Mentoring

All along the way, managers are going to need support. Because it's one thing to have an epiphany during a diversity presentation or in a training class, and quite another to know how to apply it in a messy, complex team breakdown dynamic involving diversity issues.

Programs

- Provide middle managers with internal and/or external resources – or maybe an online resource – when they need help dealing with diversity-related issues and challenges.
- Equip HR to be able to conduct just-in-time, short, simple, easy-to-manage interventions to help address cross-cultural and diversity-related issues and challenges.

Monitor

Are we for real on this? If so, we've got to keep tabs on progress.

Strategy: Give Them Activities and Metrics to Shoot For and Then Keep Score

In contrast to the strategy in the “equip” phase, where data is shared with middle managers to help them get a handle on the issue, the focus here is on accountability: establishing goals and objectives they will be responsible for achieving.

Programs

- Develop a balanced scorecard and publish it in a highly public way. A scorecard should have measurable behavioral changes such as employee satisfaction surveys, exit interviews, etc., as well as measurable representation changes such as attrition, succession, etc.
- Have managers present their programs to local diversity councils or business forums.
- In talent reviews, include diversity/cross-cultural competency as a valued competency for the advancement of managers.

- Create a diversity index – a series of diversity-related questions asked of all employees through an existing employee engagement survey or as a stand-alone effort. Track trends over time.
- Add diversity practices as a performance objective for middle managers.
- And, of course, tie the results to the compensation and bonus system.

Strategy: Provide Proof of a Direct Correlation Between Company Success and Diversity

Admittedly, this one still is more elusive than we would like, but the time has come to prove this correlation and not merely rely on the common-sense approach.

Programs

- Tap internal/external measurement gurus who can go beyond the traditional ways of measuring diversity. Once new metrics are identified, embed them into the Balanced Scorecard.
- Work with PR to ensure internal and external coverage of successful product lines/innovative solutions deployed by diverse, multicultural teams, highlighting how diversity contributes to the bottom line.
- Use innovative ways to link managerial support of diversity and inclusion to other measures. For example, on an employee satisfaction survey, ask respondents to indicate whether their managers are supportive of their diversity and inclusion activities. Then measure satisfaction and commitment by those who indicate their managers are supportive and those who say they're not. Showing the correlation between support and satisfaction can drive home the importance of the manager's role.

Partner

Relationships are a key for this work to go forward. It's not enough to turn up the heat and provide tools and incentives. Ultimately, the work of diversity is held together by the dual masters of business imperatives and relationships.

Strategy: Sweeten the Internal Partnerships

Middle managers want to know they're not alone in the process, especially when they're being held accountable for results. When middle managers are accountable for results, diversity practitioners are in the best position to become valued partners.

Programs

- Provide resources for the middle managers to achieve their goals. Create training programs for their employees, timely interventions when there are diversity issues, and PowerPoint presentations for managers to share with their direct reports.
- Diversity and HR practitioners should make themselves personally available for heart-to-hearts with managers who are committed to the work and who are willing to be open about some of the challenges they are facing in doing the work of diversity.

Strategy: Increase the Linkages to the Company's External Relationships

One of the strengths of many corporate diversity programs is the extent and quality of their external relationships with corporate diversity organizations such as Out & Equal, National Black MBA Association, Hispanic Alliance for Career Enhancement, and Diversity Pipeline Alliance, as well as local and national social service organizations. Historically, the opportunities to connect have largely remained confined to the diversity practitioners, recruiters, and affinity group members. But these external relationships create some potentially compelling opportunities for middle managers to expand their horizons and help them achieve some of the new diversity goals to which they're now being held accountable.

Programs

- Collaborate with external partners to provide developmental options at conferences that are attractive to middle managers.
- Identify middle managers who have a good number of open positions and provide them with invitations to attend diversity recruiting fairs so they can meet a critical mass of candidates. Ensure candidates are prescreened to maximize the middle manager's time.

- Invite middle managers to participate in events that will take them outside their comfort zones and expose them to different ways of thinking.
- Incorporate corporate supplier diversity initiatives by creating opportunities for managers of business units/divisions making purchasing decisions to meet with minority, women, and disabled veteran owned business partners.
- Invite middle managers to speak at a diversity conference, sharing best practices that they have been a part of implementing.

Conclusion

The process of engaging middle managers—MMED in the lingo of this report—is indeed tough, heavy-lifting work. As outlined here—it requires nothing short of a systemic approach through the various phases of change management that must have the full involvement of every part of the enterprise—from C-suite to entry level. Strong CDO leadership is paramount to influence the wholesale mobilization of the system in the way described here.

The payoff though, we believe, is worth the sweat and tears. Middle managers must be engaged and mobilized for the work of diversity that we so passionately are convinced is for the good of our organizations and our people to truly become sustainable.

The Process

The programming committee had identified Engaging Middle Managers as a priority topic for the November 2006 meeting. However, while trying to identify outside speakers, the committee kept coming up empty-handed. Through discussion, the idea of tapping into the collective expertise of the council members came to fruition. Clearly, this is a topic that has challenged each of us. We decided to tap into our collective knowledge, wisdom, and experience and create the content ourselves.

During a Diversity Business Council meeting at Hewitt, we tackled this tough diversity issue. Rather than having a lecturer spell out his or her tricks of the trade, we worked at collectively creating a list of best practices and innovative approaches that each of us can try back home.

Here’s the process we followed:

1. Decide on an approach. We decided to approach the middle manager dilemma by viewing it as a change-management process.
2. Send out a pre-session questionnaire with the following questions:
 - The biggest barrier to engaging middle managers is...
 - The biggest enabler to engaging middle managers is...
 - What would it look like to have middle managers engaged in the diversity change-management process?
 - At the face-to-face session, begin the creative process by sharing results of the pre-session questionnaire. Then create “headlines” on the current state of MMED and “headlines” on the desired state of MMED (headlines are one-liners to describe the state of middle manager engagement in diversity work).
3. List strategies and programs for the five key phases:
 - Influence
 - Enroll
 - Equip
 - Monitor
 - Partner
4. Facilitator synthesizes notes and writes draft of white paper.
5. Participants review and edit white paper.
6. Final white paper is written by facilitator.
7. Final white paper is reviewed by participants.
8. Final white paper is published and PowerPoint is created to be used by members.

Note: while there were myriad case studies of programs that have worked at each of our organizations, this white paper does not include these. We aimed at identifying the key challenge and root causes, and then strategies for addressing these. We then identified programs to consider in executing each of the strategies, but stopped short of describing in detail the programs themselves. The idea is for each council member who uses the PowerPoint based on this white paper to contextualize the strategies and program details depending on their audiences. For future consideration, the council could consider capturing a series of case studies that illustrate the various strategies and programs captured in this paper.

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About This Report

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On Friday, November 3, 2006, the following Diversity Business Council members created the content of this white paper through a facilitated session.

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About The Conference Board Diversity Councils

For over a decade, The Conference Board Diversity & Inclusion Councils have been tackling the critical issues from race and gender to religion and culture that face organizations operating in today's diverse world. The Conference Board Diversity & Inclusion Councils meet three times per year to discuss business practices and strategies aimed at making their employees and organizations to be the most productive that they can be.

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