



From Numbers to Caring by the Numbers: Unlocking the BLEND for High-Performance Organizations

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Abstract

Organizations today are saturated with strategic plans, HR development programs, and advanced technology. Yet execution remains elusive: conversations loop, goals get misinterpreted, and progress seems slower and smaller than expected. Studies show only 15% of businesses achieve at least two-thirds of their strategic objectives (Bridges, 2020). This paper argues that the root cause is not poor strategy or employee motivation but an unled space between data and people. It posits that middle management is uniquely positioned to lead in this space. Most organizations attempt to fix execution through sharper KPIs, new technologies, or more coaching, but they often overlook the need to integrate logic (data, outcomes) with emotion (people, engagement) through a living, responsive leadership system. This paper introduces Layered Leadership, a systems-level approach that redefines middle managers not as task enforcers or rule-keepers but as an empowered and essential leadership tier. Based on executive experience, research, and field methodology, it presents the L.E.A.D. from the Middle framework (Leverage, Enable, Align, Drive). When applied in companies with 30–100 employees, this model produced up to 23% rise in profitability, up to 67% increase in retention, and up to 200% jump in engagement. The approach disrupts both traditional hierarchy and people-centric models, proposing a new roadmap for building sustainable, high-performance organizations.

Keywords: middle management, leadership systems, strategy-execution gap, organizational synergy, L.E.A.D. framework

1. Introduction

Across industries, business leaders continue to face a familiar challenge: why do organizations struggle to execute their strategies effectively? The journey from strategy to execution remains fraught with obstacles, with failure rates ranging from 67% to 90%, according to studies by Harvard Business Review and Kaplan and Norton (Forbes, 2025). This gap between intention and results persists even in large-scale initiatives: McKinsey research found that approximately 70% of organizational transformations fail to achieve their objectives, despite substantial investments of time and resources (Forbes, 2021). Meanwhile, a recent Gartner HR survey reveals that less than half of employees (41%) are achieving optimal performance, and only 29% of HR leaders feel confident that their organization's current processes effectively help employees achieve and sustain their best possible performance (Garner, 2023), underscoring persistent execution gaps that drain productivity and erode confidence in strategic initiatives. Together, these findings highlight a pervasive execution problem that transcends industries and company sizes.

Despite extensive investments in planning, technology, and talent development, a troubling pattern persists. The breakdown isn't in the quality of the plans or the commitment of the people, it's in the execution. Yet, most traditional responses fall into one of two categories: optimizing strategic clarity or deepening human-centric interventions.

The first category, strategic optimizers, tighten KPIs, launch new performance dashboards, and enforce stricter governance models. The second category, human-centered reformers, introduce coaching programs, wellness initiatives, and culture-shift campaigns. While both approaches add value, neither addresses the often invisible disconnect between strategy and everyday operations. This so-called "strategy-execution gap" is not just a metaphor, it is a measurable void where resources vanish, motivation wanes, and intended outcomes fall short.

Before exploring solutions, it's worth revisiting an age-old debate: in business, what comes first - numbers or people? Perhaps the answer lies not in choosing one over the other but in creating synergy between them.

This paper offers a new lens. What if the real problem is not strategy versus people, but the lack of integration between the two? And what if that missing integration lives within the middle layer of the organization, between executives and employees, where responsibility is high, but formal authority is limited?

Based on reverse-engineered personal experience, first as an executive, and later through an unexpected immersion into middle management style personal transition, the author reframes middle managers as a distinct leadership tier. They are not simply task handlers, messengers, or compliance enforcers; they are the critical link between strategic vision and operational reality. They operate in the area where logic (KPIs, structure, reporting) intersects with emotion (engagement, communication, influence).

Yet, most organizations do little to prepare middle managers for this critical role. According to the 2025 edition of Gallup's State of the Workforce Report, only 44% of managers worldwide report having received formal management training (Gallup, 2025). As a result, these essential contributors are overloaded, overlooked, and under-leveraged—creating ripple effects and bottlenecks throughout the organization. The author proposes that unlocking scalable

organizational performance requires a layered leadership system that empowers, equips, and enables the middle to lead effectively.

2. Focus, Hypothesis and Methodology

Challenge

This study focusses on the persistent challenge of the strategy-execution gap in organizations.

Hypothesis

The author's hypothesis emerged from a blended perspective shaped by 17 years in executive leadership and 17 years of hands-on leadership in a family context. Before founding BuzzCodex, the author co-led a multinational firm of over 150 employees, where middle managers ensured operational continuity but were not recognized as a distinct leadership tier. A sabbatical to prioritize family life fundamentally shifted her view of leadership. Navigating constant interruptions, emotional intensity, and non-delegable logistics revealed that traditional executive-style decision-making and time management do not hold in dynamic, high-friction environments. For the first time, she experienced the complex, often invisible reality of middle management: without authority, but with immense responsibility.

This led to the hypothesis: *Leadership is not confined to the top of an organization. It also lives in the middle layers, where strategic intent is translated into execution, and these layers require a different set of tools, language, and leadership systems.* Expecting executives to span both strategic oversight and operational execution is unrealistic and unsustainable. Without structured leadership support for the middle, organizations risk overloading top leaders, experiencing miscommunication between executives and employees, and ultimately undermining performance.

This insight laid the foundation for the Layered Leadership model. The author introduces the metaphor of the 'neck', a connective structure between the head (executive vision) and the body (frontline execution). When the neck is unsupported, the entire system misaligns, vision cannot translate, and execution loses coherence. Supporting the middle is therefore not optional, it is essential.

Methodology

The methodology underpinning this study is grounded in a reverse-engineered leadership journey that blends:

- executive-level experience with hands-on, personal leadership in non-traditional contexts;
- applied research;
- the design and delivery of a conceptual framework and a prototype program;
- and a practical integration of qualitative insights and quantitative evaluation.

3. Framework, Prototype Program and Data Collection

The L.E.A.D. framework was designed to activate this vital middle layer. By focusing on four interrelated pillars (Leverage, Enable, Align, and Drive), middle managers developed a renewed sense of legitimacy and capability to effectively bridge strategy and execution.

Note: The prototype programs were conducted within small to mid-sized enterprises (SMEs) with founder-driven cultures. These are environments that welcomed experimentation and

where leadership buy-in was readily available. Larger, more bureaucratic organizations may face barriers such as change resistance, rigid HR policies, or union constraints.

Nonetheless, the underlying insight remains widely applicable: without a codified leadership model for middle management, organizations risk undermining their own execution capacity. Leadership programs that bypass this layer are incomplete. Cultural initiatives that exclude it are unsustainable. And transformation efforts that overburden executives while neglecting the middle are bound to stall.

To refine and validate the framework, the author partnered with three SMEs (ranging from 30 to 100 employees), each aiming to transition their middle management from task-focused supervisors to strategic operational leaders. The participating sectors included technology services, manufacturing, and professional services (each with distinct operational realities).

The prototype program followed a structured, three-phase intervention:

1. **Assessment and Awareness:** Managers completed a Leadership Maturity Index, measuring self-perception, confidence in execution, relational skills, and systems thinking.
2. **Activation through Training:** Immersive workshops focused on the four L.E.A.D. domains: Leverage, Enable, Align, Drive (described in the following section).
3. **Embedded Practice and Reflection:** Managers applied the training in real-time projects and cross-functional initiatives tied to strategic priorities. Coaching supported daily execution, and peer-learning circles promoted shared insights and mutual accountability.

Throughout the prototype, data was collected using multiple methods:

- Pre- and post-program employee engagement surveys
- Monthly executive and key stakeholder check-ins
- 360-degree feedback evaluations
- Cross-functional productivity KPIs
- Exit interview trends and retention analysis

The L.E.A.D. prototype was refined through continuous feedback. Data collected from workshops, check-ins, and performance metrics were aligned with the four pillars to evaluate impact and ensure sustainable result.

Applied Implementation Overview

The L.E.A.D. from the middle program emphasized situational leadership and used real organizational tensions as case material. This helped managers develop 'leadership fluency', the ability to navigate ambiguity, mediate conflict, and direct energy toward outcomes without defaulting to command-and-control behaviors.

Each session integrated coaching based on real-time business pressures. For instance, one workshop focused on cross-functional misalignment during a software release cycle. Managers role-played stakeholder dialogues, rehearsed trade-off decisions, and practiced making strategic escalations.

A foundational component of the L.E.A.D. framework was its embrace of metrics not just as oversight, but as communication tools. Managers learned to translate numeric outcomes into strategic narratives and emotional appeals. This shift made performance data meaningful to teams and executives alike, bridging the logical-emotional divide that so often causes misalignment.

From a theoretical perspective, the L.E.A.D. model aligns with complex leadership theory, which emphasizes the role of informal structures and dynamic roles in enabling adaptability within organizations. Middle managers, situated during formal hierarchies and informal influence webs, are ideally positioned to foster adaptability, if their roles are systemically supported.

The L.E.A.D. model also draws on Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2017), particularly its emphasis on psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When managers were trained to lead with these principles in mind, engagement flourished not only among themselves but also within their teams.

Comparison with traditional performance improvement frameworks reveals the unique advantage of L.E.A.D.: it is simultaneously structural and human. While lean management focuses on eliminating waste and agile emphasizes iterative delivery, L.E.A.D. bridges both by emphasizing the people who orchestrate processes and momentum.

Moreover, the pilot revealed significant differences in how various organizational cultures responded. Founder-led companies embraced the framework most fully, while more traditional firms needed extra time to adjust their view of middle management from 'process guardians' to 'strategic leaders'.

The Four Pillars of the L.E.A.D. Framework

Leverage: Shifting Mindset, Unlocking Assets and Potential
The first step in the L.E.A.D. model helps managers recognize the assets already within their reach, both personal and organizational. Many middle managers are unaware of their influence and unsure how to apply their strengths at scale. In practice, this includes:

- Shifting from an operational to a leadership mindset
- Conducting a personal SWOT aligned with strategic goals
- Facilitating team-level SWOTs linked to business objectives
- Leading cross-department SWOTs for broader insight
- Building action plans informed by these assessments

A core insight is that many middle managers step into their roles without formal leadership training. Introducing the language and discipline of leadership helps them move from feeling like imposters to seeing themselves as strategic stewards. Leverage turns competence into confidence.

Enable: Equipping with Tools, Knowledge, and Authority
Middle managers often work in emotionally charged environments, balancing customer complaints, disengaged employees, executive expectations, and peer competition, while still delivering results tied to KPIs and budgets. The Enable pillar equips them with specific skills

required to lead between the layers of strategy and execution. Key practices include:

- Personal optimization to build capacity without burnout
- Communication and conflict resolution techniques
- Building influence, trust, and rapport across levels
- Giving and receiving feedback with accountability

Managers who develop this pillar become stabilizers, able to hold emotional weight and operational focus simultaneously, fostering both performance and engagement.

Align: Strategic and Operational Integration
Alignment is the often-invisible competency that transforms scattered efforts into unified movement. Middle managers must understand the bigger picture, interpret strategic goals, translate them into action, and coordinate across teams. This pillar teaches:

- Vertical alignment between executive direction and frontline activity
- Horizontal coordination across departments and silos
- Temporal alignment, balancing immediate needs with long-term priorities

When alignment is weak, teams drift; when its strong, strategy becomes seamless. This pillar ensures that energy is not wasted, and that every action is anchored to purpose.

Drive: Execution with Ownership and Discipline
The Drive pillar centers on turning momentum into measurable outcomes. Middle managers must develop autonomy, discipline, and follow-through systems to convert ideas into deliverables. Core elements include:

- Making decisions amid uncertainty
- Creating accountability systems and tracking milestones
- Leading transparent processes with built-in feedback loops

Drive transforms leadership from theory into high-impact execution. It ensures that great ideas don't stay on whiteboards; they are delivered, refined, and scaled in real time.

4. Results

This prototype program was designed not just to test a concept, but to collaboratively shape a scalable model for layered leadership in real-world conditions. These gains extended well beyond isolated metrics, signaling a systemic shift in how middle management operated and how teams aligned with strategic priorities.

Quantitative data collected over a six-month period revealed the following results (table 1):

- An 18–23% increase in team productivity, measured by daily output (*Table 1, Row 1*)
- A 34–67% improvement in employee retention, particularly among high-performing staff (*Table 1, Row 2*)
- Up to a 200% rise in self-reported engagement, based on a four-point Likert scale measuring motivation, clarity of purpose, and collaboration (*Table 1, Row 3*)
- Executives reclaimed 5-8 hours per week, enabling a shift from operational tasks to strategic leadership focus (*Table 1, Row 4*).

Table 1: Maximum Impact of the L.E.A.D. Framework

Metric	Baseline	Post-Program	% Change
1.Productivity (Team Output)	100	123	+23%
2.Employee Retention *	58%	97%	+67%
3.Engagement (Self-Reported) **	Low	High	+200%
4.Executive Time Reclaimed***	—	5–8 hours/week	+8–20%

Source: BuzzCodex

Notes:

* The 67% increase in total retention reflects both overall stability and the recovery of at-risk employees who were previously disengaged or considering leaving.

**Engagement improvements were supported by observable behavioral changes—including significant reductions in social media distraction, workplace gossip, absenteeism, and quiet quitting.

***Based on a 40-60-hour workweek.

Observations and Reports

Managers reported a marked boost in confidence and clarity. Pre-program interviews often included statements such as, “I just follow instructions” or “I’m not sure what decisions I’m allowed to make.” Post-program reflections painted a very different picture: “I now see myself as a leader of systems, not just the operational layer” and “I understand how my work directly contributes to the company’s mission.”

Executives observed that common bottlenecks, such as slow approval chains, project delays, and communication breakdowns, diminished significantly. Middle managers began stepping into the role of strategic stewards rather than functioning solely as operational intermediaries. This cultural and structural evolution led to more effective delegation, faster execution, and clearer alignment across departments.

A compelling example comes from the technology services firm. One middle manager, empowered by the training, restructured the client onboarding process. Previously, it involved multiple approvals and often caused two-week delays. After applying the L.E.A.D. framework, she replaced the process with a streamlined, three-step protocol and introduced clear decision checkpoints, reducing delays by 50%.

The implementation of peer-learning circles also played a pivotal role in fostering organizational cohesion. Managers began to see each other not as rivals vying for executive recognition, but as allies facing common challenges and co-owning delivery of strategic goals. This network of mutual support, built on trust and shared experience, became especially valuable during high-pressure situations and critical decision points.

5. Implication

The Modern Leadership Imperative

For too long, leadership has been viewed as a vertical climb, a pursuit of altitude rather than effectiveness. We idolize visionaries and founders, while quietly expecting the middle to simply “make it work.” Yet another form of leadership exists, one that lives in the tension between vision and reality, emotion and logic, initiative and accountability.

Recent research underscores the urgency:

- Recent research underscores the urgency: While only one in five employees (20%) report receiving feedback weekly, about half of managers (50%) believe they deliver it that often (Gallup, 2024). This gap between managers' perceptions and employees' experiences not only undermines trust and performance but also accelerates disengagement and turnover.
- According to Gallup's ongoing research on employee experience, managers drive up to 70% of engagement outcomes, and over half of employees have left jobs primarily to escape poor management (Inspiring Workplaces, 2024).

The middle is where either magic happens or where burnout and bottleneck take root. The outcomes of the LEAD from the Middle prototype validate the author's core hypothesis: the strategy-execution gap isn't caused by weak strategy or low talent. It's driven by an unled space in between. Middle management is the natural bridge between logic and emotion, between numbers and people, yet they're rarely treated as such.

Historically, middle managers have been trapped in a paradox. They are expected to enforce executive direction with precision while simultaneously responding empathetically to the needs of their teams. This dual responsibility demands a form of intelligence that extends far beyond task delegation, it requires systemic fluency.

Leadership scholarship, spanning foundational theories and contemporary frameworks reinforces this need:

- Complexity Leadership Theory (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007) emphasizes enabling leadership as essential for navigating non-linear, adaptive systems.
- The Dual Operating System (Kotter, 2012) advocates for a formal hierarchy operating alongside informal networks to foster innovation and agility.
- Adhocracy (Mintzberg, 1979) underscores the necessity of hybrid roles and fluid leadership structures in dynamic environments.

Yet, most HR systems continue to invest disproportionately in executive pipelines, overlooking the untapped leverage within the middle layers.

The fact that only 44% of managers report receiving adequate leadership training (Gallup, 2025) isn't just a missed opportunity, it's a strategic vulnerability with measurable consequences. According to Gallup, the cost of poor management and lost productivity from disengaged employees is estimated at \$8.8 trillion globally, equivalent to 9% of worldwide GDP (Gallup, 2024). In 2024 alone, declining employee engagement cost the global economy an additional \$438 billion in lost productivity (Gallup, 2025). This underscores how unprepared managers drain performance, retention, and profitability on an unprecedented scale. The Layered Leadership Model, operationalized through the L.E.A.D. framework, offers a structured and scalable solution to this persistent gap.

Implications for Organizational Design

The successful implementation of the L.E.A.D. framework invites a broader re-evaluation of how organizations conceptualize and structure leadership itself. First, middle management must be redefined as a leadership layer with clear responsibilities, decision rights, and a shared language, equal in importance to executives and front-line teams. Achieving this requires both a mindset shift and structural reinforcement.

Organizations should update their performance review systems to include middle-tier leadership capabilities such as influence effectiveness, cross-functional problem-solving, and fostering psychological safety. Promotions should not be the only form of advancement; lateral progression within the middle tier can help retain top talent and prevent premature promotion into ill-fitting roles.

Culturally, companies that recognize and celebrate the contributions of middle management foster deeper loyalty, from both employees and customers, and strengthen overall organizational resilience. Internal communication strategies should position middle managers not merely as recipients of messaging, but as co-authors and amplifiers of strategic vision. Their inclusion enhances credibility across organizational levels and reinforces a shared sense of ownership and alignment.

From a risk management perspective, developing the middle reduces dependency on top leaders. When strategic execution relies solely on senior leadership, turnover becomes destabilizing. A well-equipped middle tier creates continuity, consistency, and executional integrity, even in times of change.

Finally, in a world where remote and hybrid work models have become the norm, middle managers play an increasingly vital role. They are the cohesion agents, the connective tissue that holds culture, communication, and performance together in the absence of physical proximity. Investing in their growth is not a sunk cost. It is a competitive advantage.

Strategic Implications

The findings of this paper suggest that organizations must fundamentally rethink how they define, support, and evaluate middle management. Performance systems should incorporate leadership metrics tailored specifically to this tier, such as cross-functional alignment, adaptive coordination, and emotional resilience.

Human Resources departments should no longer treat middle management as a transitory phase in the leadership pipeline. Instead, it should be recognized as a distinct specialization. Just as technical experts can become principal engineers without moving into executive roles, middle managers should have a clear path to mastery that doesn't require climbing to the C-suite.

Executives, too, must re-evaluate how they allocate their time and attention. By engaging in strategic conversations with middle managers, not just operational check-ins, they unlock powerful feedback loops that sharpen direction and accelerate decision-making across the organization.

Finally, leadership development providers and academic institutions must modernize their offerings. Few MBA programs or training platforms address the specific challenges faced by middle managers, those who must navigate both vertical accountability and horizontal influence. The critical question becomes: how do we equip the middle not just to survive, but to lead?

Future Research Directions

While the L.E.A.D. prototype demonstrated strong results across small and mid-sized enterprises (SMEs), further research is needed to explore how large, multinational

organizations can implement layered leadership systems without introducing excessive bureaucracy or undermining local autonomy.

As both internal and external organizational complexity continues to grow, longtime studies could assess the impact of L.E.A.D. on employee lifetime value, psychological safety, and strategic agility over multi-year cycles. Comparative studies across sectors - public vs. private, high-tech vs. healthcare would also illuminate contextual nuances.

Finally, developing a leadership maturity matrix specific to middle management could standardize evaluation and create industry benchmarks.

6. Contrasting Perspectives: The Case Against Middle Management

While this study argues for the revitalization of middle management as a strategic leadership tier, some contemporary perspectives suggest that middle management itself is becoming obsolete. *The Death of Middle Management: How Companies Are Flattening Hierarchies* (Businessner, 2025) describes how organizations are increasingly removing middle layers to accelerate decision-making, reduce operational costs, and foster self-directed teams. Proponents of this approach contend that flattening hierarchies creates greater agility and reduces bureaucracy. From this viewpoint, investing in frameworks that strengthen the middle may be seen as counterproductive or outdated, particularly in industries where rapid adaptation is critical.

However, this paper takes the position that flattening hierarchies is not universally beneficial and often introduces hidden costs. When middle management is removed without replacing its coordinating and bridging functions, organizations frequently experience:

- Decision bottlenecks at the top, where executives become overwhelmed by tactical issues.
- Erosion of strategic alignment, as self-directed teams interpret goals inconsistently.
- Declining employee engagement, due to lack of mentorship, feedback, and development opportunities that middle managers traditionally provide.

The L.E.A.D. framework addresses these challenges by equipping middle managers to function not as bureaucratic overseers but as adaptive leaders who translate strategy into action while sustaining human connection. Rather than reinforcing rigid hierarchy, this approach creates a layered system of distributed leadership that combines clarity with responsiveness.

In sectors where complexity, scale, and cross-functional collaboration remain essential, the L.E.A.D. model offers a more sustainable alternative to complete flattening—preserving strategic coherence without sacrificing speed or innovation.

Conclusion

This topic began with a simple question: why do great strategies so often fail to produce great results? As explored through both theory and practice, the answer lies not in the quality of the strategy or the talent of the people, but in the unaddressed space between them.

In today's environment, where "business as usual" is no longer a viable model, middle management is no longer a passive layer. It is a distinct leadership tier that requires its own system, structure, and support. Treating it merely as a conduit for directives or a compliance checkpoint is not only outdated, but also actively detrimental.

The L.E.A.D. from the Middle framework offers a blueprint for meaningful change. By emphasizing the pillars of Leverage, Enable, Align, and Drive, it equips middle managers with the clarity, capacity, and confidence needed to execute strategy both sustainably and effectively. The model incorporates horizontal leadership, enabling coordination across departments, and vertical leadership, empowering reconciliation between executive vision and frontline execution.

Organizations that intentionally activate this middle layer will unlock improvements not only in productivity, but also in resilience, cohesion, and strategic momentum.

In an era defined by speed, complexity, and human-centered innovation, leadership must evolve, from rigid hierarchy to layered coordination. The middle is where this evolution takes root. And the future of high-performance organizations may well depend on our ability to stop skipping the middle and start leading from it.

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