

Leading in Ambiguity: Strategies for Middle Managers

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Abstract

Leading in ambiguity is an intrinsic but under-discussed role of a middle manager. Often, middle managers are dealing with personnel and operational situations in which there is no clear or obvious choice, no clear guidance, or no full understanding of the context. Yet middle managers still have to lead, make decisions, and communicate and facilitate change with less than perfect information. Our staff also struggle to accept ambiguity and long for clarity that may never be realized. Successful middle management means living in the gray areas, identifying the power and potential of ambiguous roles and circumstances, and deploying strategies to lead despite the ambiguity inherent in our work. This article reviews relevant literature on ambiguity and management and explores two scenarios where we introduce established management tools that can help lead through—and in synergy with—ambiguity. These scenarios touch on the challenges of working in an ambiguous environment, ambiguous direction from senior leadership, and discomfort with ambiguity on the part of staff. We will center the experience of middle managers in libraries and the impact of ambiguity on their own effectiveness and morale.

Introduction

Middle management has long been characterized by ambiguity, as this work exists in a liminal space that requires perpetual sensemaking, translation, negotiation, and adaptation. In this article, we begin with a selective review of management literature that considers a variety of causes for and consequences of ambiguity in middle management. We also review the library literature on middle management and ambiguity, in which challenges specific to our field are considered. In this literature, we find that librarians as a whole are actually accustomed to ambiguous roles and environments and have even embraced ambiguity as a catalyst for empowerment, service improvement, and community building. In our article, we center this positive framing of ambiguity as we take readers through two scenarios drawn from our own

management experiences and apply established management tools to illustrate how a positive, problem-solving approach to leading in ambiguity might work in practice. While ambiguity in middle management is almost certainly here to stay, library middle managers can practice acceptance of this aspect of our roles and even transform ambiguity into a resource that empowers them and their teams to move forward with a strong and fruitful approach.

Literature Review

The term “middle management” is used widely within and beyond libraries and in the library literature. While lacking a precise definition, middle management typically refers to a recognizable role and array of responsibilities. Middle managers in libraries are below the top level of management and typically supervise one or more professional staff. Often, middle management in libraries is equated with department heads (Bynoe 2022). Business researcher Henry Mintzberg’s (1979) frequently cited definition of middle management includes everyone in an organization who is not at the “strategic apex or in the operating core” (20). Middle managers may not themselves determine the strategic direction of the library but instead are generally responsible for implementing top leadership goals and overseeing the day-to-day operations of the library, including the supervision of frontline staff and budget management (Gordon 2020). Middle managers “translate” or make sense of strategic directions in their libraries for staff and operations (Farrell 2014, 694). Middle managers are simultaneously tasked with supporting upper administrators and helping them succeed while shielding staff from the negative impacts that may come down from senior leadership (Farrell 2014; Gjerde and Alvesson 2020). With technological advances in recent years, the role of middle management in libraries is increasingly focused on communication, collaboration with external partners, and the ability to continually adapt to changes (Chang and Bright 2012; Farrell 2014). Indeed, a primary task of middle management in libraries is often one of change management (Farrell 2013).

There is agreement in the literature that middle management is a role characterized by ambiguity (Gjerde and Alvesson 2020). Middle managers must navigate competing, contradictory, and complex demands (Tarakci et al. 2023). They regularly find themselves needing to make decisions without knowing how these decisions will ultimately play out (Parse 2014). Middle managers often experience an imbalance between their level of responsibility and authority (Soules 2011). The lack of a consensus definition for middle management itself contributes to the ambiguity experienced by middle managers (Thomas and Linstead 2002). The evolving structures of organizations, such as flattening hierarchies, cause further confusion. Blurred lines between middle managers and their superiors and subordinates increase pressure

on middle managers to justify and articulate their roles (Thomas and Linstead 2002). Middle managers also experience role conflict, needing to perform the identity of “leader” when they are with subordinates and then quickly shift to the identity of “subordinate” when they are with their own supervisors (Anicich and Hirsh 2017). Management scholars Eric Anicich and Jacob Hirsh characterize this dynamic for middle managers as “vertical code-switching,” with middle managers having to switch back and forth between those with more and less power than them in the organization more frequently than other employees (Anicich and Hirsh 2017, 663). Meanwhile, middle managers have ambiguous and shifting identities: “*The middle manager is therefore at once controller, controlled, resister and resisted*” (italics in original; Harding, Lee, and Ford 2014, 1231). The ambiguity of middle management is not just about their middle position in the hierarchy but also about being in a state of “perpetual liminality”: always in-between, constituting and reconstituting their identity moment by moment (Dille 2023, 29).

Being situated in academic libraries also uniquely prepares middle managers for ambiguity, since this liminal and marginal status is a feature of our profession more broadly. Academic librarians are accustomed to working amid constant change and being caught in the middle on our campuses. We are of the academy but also identify with libraries in their broader history and role, occupying a space between the professional sphere and the academic one (Whitchurch 2009). The academic librarian is both inside and outside the academic disciplines they support; this position lends them a uniquely expansive view of research and teaching across campus and makes them excellent at translating disciplinary norms for students (Simmons 2005, 299). Librarians’ marginal status on campuses compared to traditional faculty gives them unique space and freedom to experiment with critical teaching methods and assessment (Accardi 2010, 252). Acceptance of ambiguity is also an underpinning of critical information literacy, which challenges positivist, simplistic, black-and-white thinking and instead embraces nuance and complexity (Simmons 2005).

The ambiguity of the middle manager role takes its toll. Middle managers find themselves feeling unsupported and insecure (Thomas and Linstead 2002; Harding, Lee, and Ford 2014). Middle managers experience tension over loyalties, caught between their bosses and their employees, “potentially exposing middle managers to a weary precariousness, loneliness, and vulnerability” (Dille 2023, 21). The state of perpetually being caught in the middle, unable to satisfy everyone above and below, sets up middle managers to feel frustrated that success is always out of reach (Gabel 2002).

The library literature aligns with these perspectives on the ambiguity inherent in middle management. Middle managers in libraries experience challenges in dysfunctional organizations when their supervisors are ineffective leaders and when expectations change or are unclear (Muir and Davidson 2018). Library middle managers find themselves highly accountable for their sphere of responsibility, even when they receive less communication than they might prefer from senior leaders (Cawthorne 2010). Unlike senior management, middle managers in libraries often lack the necessary authority to direct work toward their objectives and must instead influence and cajole staff toward meeting their goals (Farrell 2013). Indeed, despite limited organizational power, middle managers in libraries are focused on and demonstrate leadership skills (Do and Nuth 2020). Library middle managers share the challenges characterized in the broader management literature of having more responsibility than authority, but they also face unique challenges such as constant change in the field, the heterogeneity of positions in librarianship that they have to navigate, and public services with many “fires” (Gordon 2020, 48). Library middle managers may thus be as stressed as their counterparts in other fields of work, “feeling stuck, squeezed, drained, and frustrated” (Gordon 2020, 49). Middle managers in libraries are at risk of burnout due to role ambiguity and code switching (Bynoe 2022). Librarians from marginalized identities experience even greater challenges as middle managers, finding their qualifications and authority questioned by coworkers and patrons and lacking role models in senior leadership (Thomas, Trucks, and Kouns 2019).

All that being said, the ambiguity of middle management also creates space for opportunities to lead, influence, and shape the workplace. If we think of middle management as less of a fixed hierarchical position and more of a perpetually liminal state, then we can recognize benefits to this “in-betweenness” (Dille 2023, 29). Because they constantly negotiate unstable circumstances and relationships, middle managers shift flexibly among identities and may thus be quite approachable and relatable to their staff compared to senior leadership (Dille 2023, 30). This likely contributes to middle managers’ ability to coach, influence change, and maintain trust. Indeed, in performing this “liminal work,” middle managers develop a set of “liminal competencies” that—if recognized and embraced—are quite powerful (Dille 2023, 30). Middle managers, contrary to some of the early literature and myths on the topic, have significant influence on the success of strategy development and implementation in their organizations through their expansive networks, sensemaking competencies, and accurate grasp of organizational capabilities (Wooldridge, Schmid, and Floyd 2008; Farrell 2014). Middle managers can effectively cope with significant organizational change by working through their

own negative emotions with their peers, so they can then frame the change optimistically and positively with their own staff (Kroon and Reif 2023).

Bringing a perspective from the field of design, Andrea Small and Kelly Schmutte (2022) consider ambiguity as “something that can be understood in two or more possible ways” (19). They acknowledge that people are hardwired for an intolerance for ambiguity, preferring categorization, certainty, familiarity, one solution, and black-and-white clarity, among other preferences (29). At the same time, Small and Schmutte argue that being able to understand something in two ways allows for choice, and with choice, ambiguity can become a place of opportunity and empowerment. Ultimately, they call for a movement where ambiguity is not something to be endured or engaged with, but something that can be embraced as a resource and tool.

This article uses scenarios to illustrate strategies for middle managers to embrace ambiguity so they can move forward in a positive framework. Each scenario applies an established management tool that leverages an ambiguous situation to enable more creative, dynamic thinking. These scenarios are fictional amalgams of real-life situations drawn from our own experiences as middle managers.

Scenario 1: Managing a Hybrid Work Environment with the Polarity Management Tool

Hybrid work environments are relatively new to the field of librarianship and create novel challenges for middle managers who must meet user needs, apply policies, address the various needs of their staff, align (or not) with the approach of their peers, and find strategies to lead when there is no clear or right answer.

Scenario: I manage a branch library that has a team of around twenty people. I agree with my leadership, who recognize that not all work looks the same and that hybrid options are highly motivating and can boost morale for some employees. Middle managers in my organization have been empowered to decide how to structure hybrid work based on an individual’s responsibilities. Half of my employees perform work that must be done on site, such as staffing service points or working directly with collections, and have little flexibility with their place of work. The other half can largely do their work from anywhere. Staff who are required to be on site to do their work express resentment at their relative lack of flexibility compared to the remote employees and complain of inequity. Those with flexibility may not recognize the

challenges these disparities can create in a workplace climate or, at least, don't identify themselves as having the potential to ameliorate the situation. As an added complexity, I have also welcomed several early-career employees into my team in the past year who would benefit from more support from their colleagues. My longer-term employees are thriving and appreciate that they are trusted to work independently. This is all happening in a context where I am balancing individual needs with a need to move forward shared organizational priorities with my team. This work is proving challenging to do in a primarily remote and asynchronous environment. I know things aren't working well, but I just don't know what to do.

Middle managers face many examples like the hybrid work scenario posed here where there is not a simple yes/no, either/or answer. Rather, middle managers often find themselves in decision-making situations where the best approach is a both/and response. This might look like keeping a service point open to the public and limiting hours in order to accommodate staff needs. In these moments, the job of the middle manager is to land in the appropriate place on the both/and continuum depending on the situation and context at any given moment. Polarity management is a useful tool that can be used to add clarity and insight by framing these both/and scenarios not as problems to solve but as polarities to manage.

The concept of polarity management was first introduced by organizational development scholar Barry Johnson in 1996 and has been refined and summarized in subsequent publications (Johnson 1996, 2005). In his work, Johnson describes polarities as a set of interdependent pairs that support a higher purpose. These interdependent pairs must be continuously managed in order to gain the positive results of each and avoid the downsides of either one (Johnson 2005). To illustrate polarity management, Johnson uses the example of breathing, which balances the interdependent pairs of inhale and exhale. Both inhaling (intaking oxygen) and exhaling (releasing carbon dioxide) are essential. They are neither good nor bad, nor right nor wrong. In fact, they are both viable options depending on your body's shifting needs. With breathing, your goal is to sustain life (access the benefits of inhaling and exhaling) and avoid death (minimize the risks of over-favoring either one).

In relation to the hybrid work environment in Scenario 1, many interdependent pairs can be identified. For example, as a middle manager, you might have to balance visible work and invisible work, needs and wants, flexibility and consistency, tasks and relationships, or any myriad interdependent pairs at play. It is also likely that you will be called upon to hold all of these interdependent pairs in your mind as you navigate through the ambiguity of the situation.

As we consider hybrid work, we will use the interdependent pair of individual needs and organizational needs to create a polarity map (Figure 1) that illustrates how polarity management can support decision-making related to creating an effective hybrid work environment. (Note: The polarity map has been simplified for the purposes of this article. The full polarity map contains twelve parts, weighing values and fears and prompting consideration of action steps.) In this situation where there is no clear or right answer, a middle manager can use this interdependent pair to assess the benefits of prioritizing various individual and organizational needs in support of hybrid work and the risks, or early warning signs, that might occur if one polarity is favored at the detriment of the other.

To create a polarity map, middle managers identify the higher purpose and greatest fears around advancing a hybrid work practice. In this scenario, we anchored our polarity map to a higher purpose of creating an effective hybrid work environment and a deeper fear of organizational ineffectiveness. Managers can then use the polarity map to explore an interdependent pair—in this case individual needs and organizational needs—recognizing the value of each polarity and the early warning signs if one is overly prioritized at the expense of the other.

As a middle manager, you see the benefits of investing in both individual needs and organizational needs in your hybrid work environment. Attending to organizational needs leads to greater consistency and sustainable resourcing of the work being done by your team and increased clarity of purpose to support strategic alignment. You also know that hybrid work must account for individual needs in order to create a workplace that is based on trust and respect, allows for more flexibility, and honors individual circumstances. At the same time, favoring either organizational or individual needs at the detriment of the other carries risk. In this case, too much investment in organizational needs can lead to missed opportunities, less innovation, less engagement, and staff resentment. Likewise, over-privileging individual needs can create a workplace where staff are working at cross-purposes and lack clarity around a shared vision that advances the work of your team and your organization. The presence of these early warning signs signals a need to rebalance individual and organizational needs.

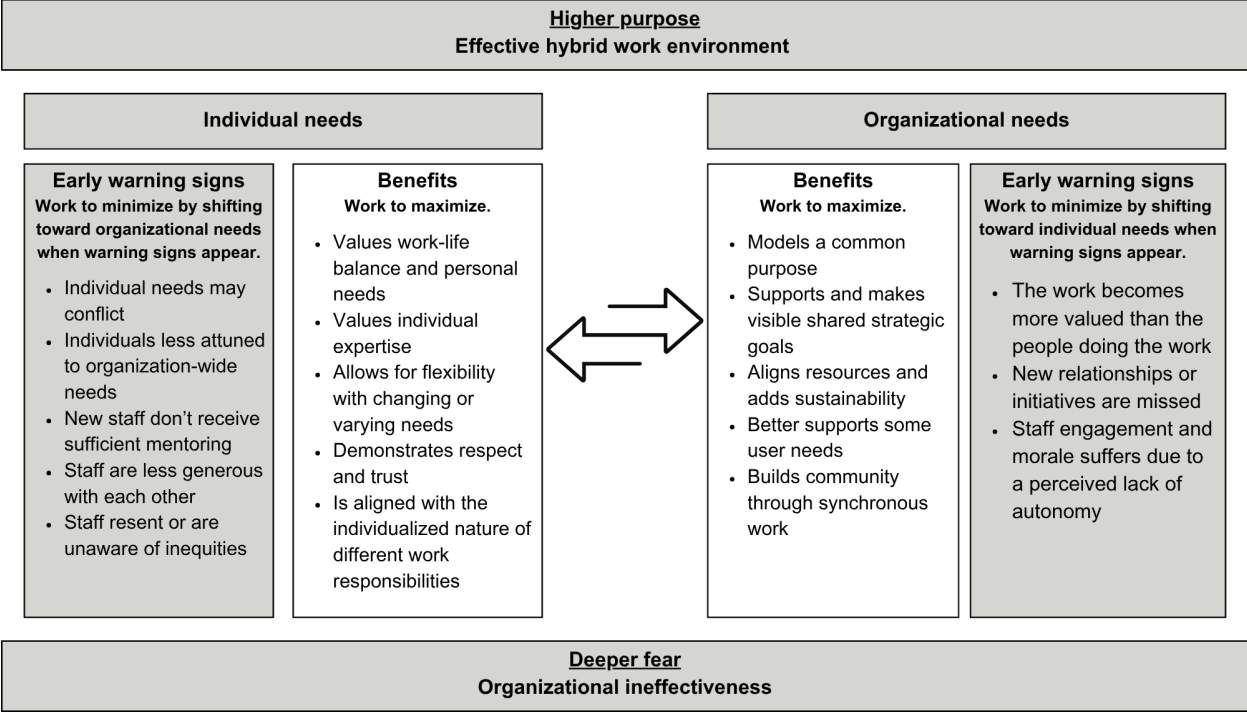


Figure 1. Polarity map of hybrid work focused on the interdependent pair of individual needs and organizational needs (adapted from Johnson 2005).

As demonstrated in the application of polarity management to Scenario 1, both individual and organizational needs are important and necessary to create an effective hybrid work environment, and both carry risks if they are out of balance with each other. In this scenario, the polarity map provides warning signs for when neglecting one polarity is detrimental to effective hybrid work. Indeed, Scenario 1 details a situation with early warning signs of under-prioritizing organizational needs, which leads to staff resentment and disengagement and a workplace where organizational needs are left unmet. Polarity management, as applied to Scenario 1, suggests the middle manager should rebalance toward organizational needs to create an effective hybrid workplace. There are many paths you can take to meet this goal, and your unique vantage point as a middle manager will empower you to adjust your approach in a way that best supports your team and the hybrid workplace you hope to build. This polarity map will continue to serve as a tool that can be referenced to make sure that over time your approach remains in balance and in service to your higher purpose. Additionally, the polarity mapping tool is well-suited to a collaborative approach, allowing for input from your supervisor, your peer network, your team, or others. Taking a collaborative approach has added benefits as it can

bring in different perspectives, build a shared understanding of the context, and help individuals see their role in navigating the ambiguity of the situation.

This analysis of an interdependent pair illustrates that there is not one right answer to the question of creating an effective hybrid work environment. Rather, polarity management surfaces an infinite number of opportunities to support and balance organizational and individual needs in hybrid work environments. Using polarity management, middle managers can better navigate ambiguity by reframing tensions not as intractable problems but as opportunities to understand their work in context. In this way, polarity management empowers middle managers to leverage their unique organizational understanding, see multiple options, and make informed decisions that best reflect continually shifting contexts. Additionally, because polarity management highlights early warnings if one polarity is too dominant, middle managers can quickly respond before significant problems take hold.

Scenario 2: Building Bridges in an Ambiguous Environment with the Boundary Spanning Leadership Tool

Middle managers must span boundaries and navigate ambiguous environments as they lead their team; work toward the goals of their department, division, and larger library; and collaborate across the organization and with external partners to accomplish goals. Boundary spanning is illustrated in the context of a library reorganization, which calls on middle managers to tend to both relational and organizational needs when no roadmap for collaboration is provided and no deep understanding of the work in the newly organized library exists.

Scenario: I am a middle manager serving as one of many department heads in a large university library system. My organization is going through a period of rapid change with a significantly reorganized structure. With these changes, many of the people who worked closely together have different reporting lines. Their work is also realigning with new priorities set at the senior leadership level. And while the organizational structure is clear on paper, there is a lot of ambiguity around how this new organizational structure will work in practice. As a middle manager, I am being called upon to implement the reorganization and create clarity and stability for my team, many of whom are feeling a sense of loss, threat, and burnout that is impacting their sense of connection to their work, their colleagues, and the organization. I cannot ask much more of my staff, who are showing up as best they can amid the uncertainty present in their work. I'm also trying to understand my own changing role as I attempt to bring clarity to my department about how we will collaborate across

the new organizational structure to accomplish our work. This is particularly hard because I don't have good information, answers, or clear next steps for me or my team.

To navigate this scenario, or other instances that require collaboration in an ambiguous environment, the steps of boundary spanning leadership can offer one approach for moving forward when there is limited information and no clear choice. Defined by organizational psychologists Chris Ernst and Donna Chrobot-Mason (2010), "Boundary spanning leadership is the ability to create direction, alignment, and commitment across boundaries in service of a higher vision or goal" (5). In this context, boundaries are not considered barriers. Rather, they are reframed as frontiers that can open new possibilities.

The boundary spanning leadership model starts by considering the divisions inherent in the reorganization scenario, where the new organizational structure creates boundaries that serve as barriers to the work. To shift these barriers to frontiers, Ernst and Chrobot-Mason offer three steps for building an environment that opens transformational opportunities.

Step 1: Manage Boundaries

The first step of boundary spanning leadership is to manage boundaries. Though perhaps counterintuitive, this step is critical to creating a sense of trust and safety in your team as it reflects human needs of belonging and differentiation. This step also provides sensemaking for an organization, recognizing that "you must be able to see group boundaries clearly before you can bridge them" (Ernst and Chrobot-Mason 2010, 83). Middle managers can engage with their team to define the boundaries of the new department (to create safety) and validate their work and the work of others in the organization (to foster respect).

To work toward managing boundaries, middle managers can ask the following:

- In what areas does my team feel threatened, and in what areas do they need a voice?
- What is our scope of work, and how does my team add unique value to the organization?

This boundary-defining exercise could be done in partnership with your team to instill a sense of ownership over your team's scope of work and to provide clarity for you and your team so you can understand the unique role that the team plays in the organization. It will also help you as a middle manager to communicate with your supervisor, advocate for your team, and better resource the work.

Step 2: Forge Common Ground

The second step of boundary spanning leadership is to forge common ground. Using the clearly defined boundaries from Step 1, you can identify work that is shared with other departments in the organization so you can act as a connector and mobilizer toward common goals.

To work toward forging common ground, middle managers can ask the following:

- Who in our organization has overlapping goals, audiences, and so on, and how can we learn more about their scope of work?
- What opportunities can we provide to build relationships at the individual and organizational levels?

As you forge common ground, your role as a middle manager is to provide opportunities for one-on-one and inter-group connection, collaboration, and trust building. Through this process, you can hold tight to the understanding of your own scope of work without defensiveness. This will allow you to favor curiosity over judgment as you create opportunities to better understand the work of your colleagues. Having a sense of the boundaries of your work will also serve to protect you and your team as you continue your sensemaking process. It will help you appreciate how other teams are defining the boundaries of their work in the new organizational structure so you can see shared interests as opportunities, not threats. Building trust and developing a community doesn't happen overnight; they require ongoing care, relationship building, and resourcing. Ultimately, forging common ground will help middle managers use boundaries to support collective action.

Step 3: Discover New Frontiers

The third step of boundary spanning leadership is to discover new frontiers. In this step, the differences that each group brings to the table become the foundation of transformational work. This step is decidedly hard because it depends on the felt sense of safety and security developed from managing boundaries (Step 1) and the trust and relationship building developed from forging common ground (Step 2). Discovering new frontiers after a reorganization requires the process of weaving (when groups interweave their distinct identities) and transforming (when groups collectively shape a new identity that will allow them all to thrive in ways that each alone could not have done).

To work toward discovering new frontiers, middle managers can ask the following:

- What is a higher-level goal that is inclusive of all group members that also allows for distinct action from each group?

- What work is being championed by your team/organization that you can only accomplish in partnership with your collaborators?

Middle managers can use a variety of tactics to support weaving and transforming. In the case of a reorganization, weaving can be achieved by considering how differences might advance shared goals while allowing each group to maintain its identity. To support transforming, middle managers can create higher-level goals that cannot be accomplished independently and offer opportunities to develop a shared vision of the future.

Library reorganizations often couple a sense of ambiguity with a feeling of loss, vulnerability, and threat. “Integrating boundaries and advancing interdependence require you not only to manage the thoughts and feelings between divided groups but also to understand how those contradictory thoughts and feelings reside within yourself,” noted Ernst and Chrobot-Mason (2010, 193). The boundary spanning leadership framework offers a tool for middle managers that can provide safety and respect in an ambiguous and emotional environment. As a result, middle managers can invest in their team and find a path forward as they begin to reframe their work toward the positive and the possibilities that the reorganization offers. In this way, the boundary spanning leadership framework can empower middle managers to lead change when information is limited and the roadmap is unclear.

Conclusion

“Living with ambiguity is the experience of not knowing explicitly all of the consequences of decisions, yet moving on with executing the details,” according to nursing theorist Rosemarie Rizzo Parse (2014). The polarity management and boundary spanning leadership tools presented in this article provide two established methods for moving forward in an ambiguous environment. They are shared here in a simplified form and with a recognition that the processes outlined for each tool have dependencies and contexts that can fall outside the control of middle managers. These tools are offered not because they provide an easy answer, but because they demonstrate how middle managers can navigate ambiguous environments when faced with problems that feel intractable and in situations when there are no right answers. In this way, middle managers can reframe ambiguity positively, as a space that allows choice, empowerment, opportunity, and infinite possibilities. Additionally, these tools can help middle managers embrace ambiguity from a place of curiosity rather than judgment, modeling a positive approach to navigating the complex and often contradictory thoughts, feelings, and contexts that are inherent in middle management positions. This allows middle managers to

create effective and constructive conditions for themselves, their team, and their organization when navigating ambiguity.

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