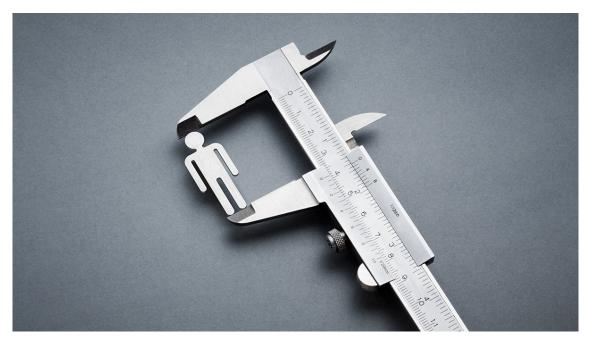Harvard
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Managing Up

Managers Are Trapped in a Performance-Compassion Dilemma

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Summary.   After two years of turmoil, employees need their managers to show compassion. At the same time, executives expect their managers and their teams to deliver results. Middle managers are often the ones feeling that tension most acutely. How can they cope with...   **more**

Based on the reaction to our earlier article on the competing demands for both compassion and results leaders are facing, and given our ongoing work and research at companies around the

world, we've learned that middle managers are often the ones feeling that tension most acutely. They feel torn between performance demands from above and calls for compassion from below.

Take, for example, Justin (not his real name), who runs the customer relations group for a private equity–backed fintech company. The whole industry has been hit with a surge of attrition, and Justin is scrambling to maintain morale and retain top talent. His people have been working exceptionally long hours to cover the needs of accounts where the relationship manager resigned, but every single person seems to have a legitimate personal challenge at the moment: one has a teenage child struggling with addiction, someone else's parent is hospitalized, another just lost her lease, and several have homes affected by wildfires. At the same time, Justin faces almost daily pressure from his executives — whose own feet are held to the fire by their board — because customer satisfaction scores are trending down sharply in several key accounts.

Justin's dilemma is typical, and the demands from both his seniors and his juniors are entirely predictable when we consider the worlds they both inhabit.

Executives' most frequent and salient interactions are with stakeholders (shareholders, boards, market analysts, etc.) who hold them accountable for company performance. As a general rule, shareholders and boards don't ask enough questions about how a leader's people are doing. Moreover, executives are often insulated from the scale and variety of problems faced by junior employees. Even when senior leaders try to seek out information, most employees put on a brave face because they're afraid to show weakness or vulnerability. Top leaders are further handicapped by their own psychology: Research shows that power reduces empathy, which means they identify less with both the frontline employees' challenges and the middle managers who must deal with these issues daily. All these factors converge to produce

executives who are highly focused on meeting performance goals and less aware that their performance demands on middle managers are possibly unreasonable given what's happening on the front lines.

Speaking of those front lines, consider the world of the frontline employee. When it comes to the need for compassion, while everyone faces challenges and stressors (mental and physical health, interpersonal dynamics, family obligations, etc.), frontline employees are less likely to have the resources to offload some of those burdens, such as child or elder care or tutoring. In addition, certain stressors (e.g., job security) are likely greater among frontline employees. Additionally, frontline employees' view of their work is likely to be more focused on specific tasks, with a less-clear sense of how their actions affect company performance. Taken together, this means that frontline employees have more stressors, fewer resources to cope with them, and less understanding of how and why their immediate managers' feet are being held to the fire to deliver results.

How can middle managers cope with these competing pressures? Focus on two sets of actions. First, work to increase the organization's "compassion capacity" — that is, help equip both senior executives and employees to shoulder more of the burden in delivering compassion so that it doesn't fall entirely on you. Second, work with both executives and employees to lower the perceived pressure of performance demands.

Work with executives to increase compassion and change the performance dialogue

It's our experience that most executives would be willing to demonstrate more compassion and better support their employees if they understood their problems better. So, middle managers' first step in getting top leaders to share the responsibility of delivering compassionate leadership is to

educate them, both by sharing data (i.e., "tell" them about the problem) and getting them to experience some of the issues directly (i.e., "show" them the problem).

"Tell" is about fixing the information flow by making top leaders aware of the extent of the problem, what frontline employees are experiencing, and how it affects middle managers. We find that bringing some very basic data to the table — such as how many people are experiencing hardships, what kinds of hardships, and what they need in order to cope — makes all the difference. In support of that, middle managers can use simple pulse surveys to capture people's engagement, concerns, and stress levels.

"Show" recognizes that there is no substitute for firsthand experiences, and we've found that leaders are better able to empathize if they personally see and hear about employees' needs for compassion. This advice goes against the instincts of some middle managers who prefer to buffer those conversations between their direct reports and their own manager so they can control the narrative. Other middle managers simply don't want to bother their leaders with this kind of detail. But if you facilitate skip-level contacts and put top leaders in direct contact with employees — for example, through informal coffee chats — then the executives are much better equipped to empathize and then to help in creating solutions.

Before taking either approach, recognize that framing is very important; if not managed well, this can appear like a post-hoc excuse for missing performance targets. Make it clear that you realize it's naïve to think an organization can take away performance pressure (or that it would it want to). Instead, help senior leaders reframe compassion as a performance imperative — something that will significantly improve performance now and especially in the long term. One simple trick to avoid the excuse framing is to bring these challenges to the table before any negative performance effects emerge.

Empower, connect, and motivate employees

Inasmuch as you need to keep showing compassion toward your staff, you don't need to fix everything yourself. Give people tools to help themselves. As recent research has found, sometimes the challenges requiring compassion are in fact "invisible enemies," where employees don't even recognize what's going on. Once again, the first step in the solution is to empower with data. For example, one large insurance company uses data analytics tools that measure people's activities on digital platforms such as Microsoft Teams. The results are displayed on employee's own dashboard to help them understand and visualize what they could do differently to enrich their community or promote their own well-being. The stats might point out that someone's participation in an online community has dropped off; the pop-up advice might prompt the individual to take a moment and log on to see if anyone else needs help, or perhaps to ask a question themselves.

Data, however, is only part of the solution. Another way middle managers can aid employees is by helping them build connections — and thereby improve their network of support. Not only have the past two years caused employee networks to shrink significantly, but in many companies we work with, upward of 30% of junior employees have joined within the last two years, meaning that some have never met their fellow employees in person. While this is far from ideal from a support standpoint, on the positive side, it means that investments made to help frontline employees connect to each other are more valuable than ever. There are excellent resources on how to build (and facilitate building) healthy networks — an important part of which is helping your employees recognize the value in doing so. Remember, the up-front cost of those investments are more than offset by long-term benefits, as healthy networks give employees other resources to leverage in dealing with their challenges, which results in fewer future demands placed on middle managers.

Reduce performance pressure from the top

When it comes to addressing pressure to perform, remember that no one is suggesting that organizations should aim for lower performance. The question is: How can senior leaders keep the heat on in ways that are less pressurized and more motivating?

We noted above that many frontline employees don't have a good understanding of "the why" of performance — only the "what." It's important, therefore, to help them better understand and appreciate the performance pressures facing the firm. In our experience, many senior executives don't spend the time explaining (or even actively seek to shield employees from) market pressures they think aren't relevant to them. What these executives often fail to recognize is that if those pressures affect the demands they place on those employees, they *are* relevant. Helping employees understand why the pressure exists helps them make sense of it. Relatedly, research shows that employees are more motivated and engaged when they have a sense of purpose, so taking the time to help them understand how their work contributes and connects to the organization's ultimate objectives can help alleviate stress.

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Of course, all of this rests on the resilience of middle managers themselves. Remember that no manager is able to effectively help their employees if they're also burned out. So it falls on you to take the time and effort for self-care and to improve your own networks of support — and on executives to model those behaviors for the benefit of the whole organization.

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