3 Steps to Unlocking Your Leadership Potential

A Guide for Senior-Level Managers

Center for Creative Leadership®

Contents

Introduction: Leading from the Middle 1

Section 1: Learning to Lead Yourself 2

Section 2: Learning to Lead Others 5

Section 3: Learning to Lead Within a System 7

Conclusion: Making it in the Middle 9

INTRODUCTION

Leading from the Middle

It probably feels a bit like a game of tug-of-war. On one side are the senior leaders of your organization who expect you to translate their strategies into effective business processes and action plans. On the other side are your direct reports who look to you to be their advocate and to ensure the directives flowing downstream reflect the realities they face each day.

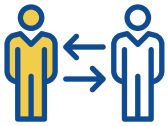
If you lead from the middle, you may feel pressure from above and blame from below. The constant tug can seem relentless as you try to keep everyone happy—all while attempting to establish the right priorities and spend your time on what matters most. You may find yourself wondering:

- *How do I balance competing interests and get everyone to work together?*
- *How do I work effectively across levels, functions, organizations, and geographic boundaries?*
- *How can I manage the complexity of it all so I'm less overwhelmed?*

We've worked with hundreds of thousands of leaders around the globe, and we know that having a holistic development plan is key. Our decades of research have found that to unlock your leadership potential and make the most of the opportunities you encounter, you need to excel in 3 important arenas—learning to **lead yourself**, **lead others**, and **lead within a system**.

SECTION 1

Learning to Lead Yourself



SECTION 2

Learning to Lead Others

SECTION 3

Learning to Lead Within a System

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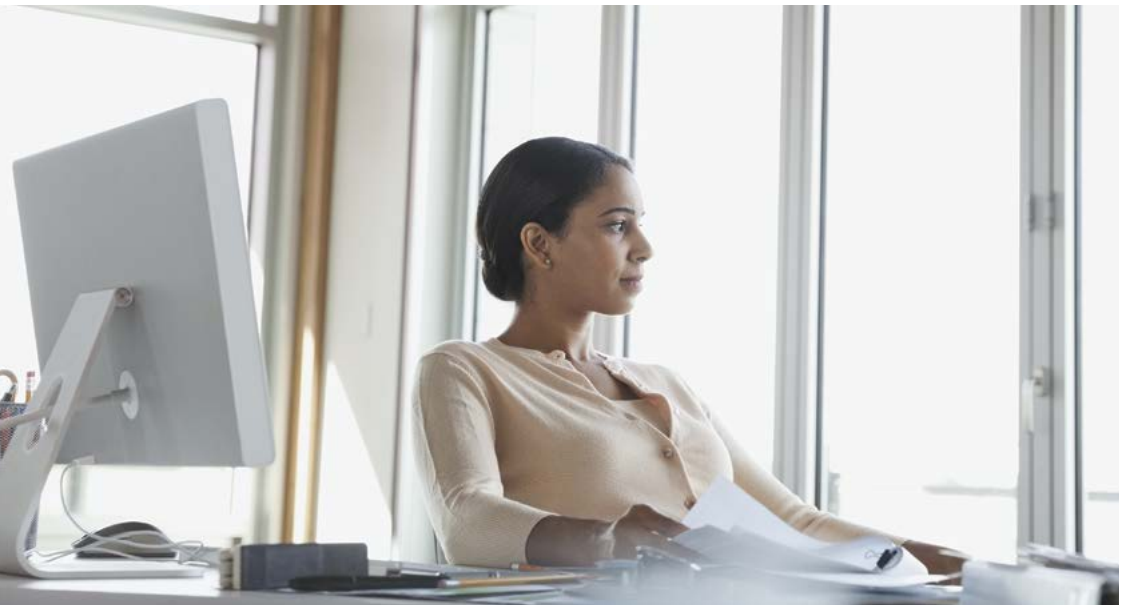

SECTION 1

Learning to Lead Yourself

Airline safety experts say if cabin pressure is lost and oxygen masks drop in midflight, focus on yourself first. Only when your own mask is in place can you safely turn your attention to helping others around you.

The same advice applies to leadership. You've got to focus on yourself first before you can effectively support others. When you've built a solid foundation at the personal level, you are equipped to tackle whatever comes at you, just like a top athlete.

1. Become more self-aware.

It's easy to think of leadership as outward facing. But your leadership effectiveness can be suppressed or amplified by what you understand about yourself. With so much going on around us in the workplace and in our private lives, it can be hard to **stop and take stock**. Consider the following:

- When was the last time you thought about which aspects of your job give you the greatest joy—or cause you the most stress?
- Do you have a clear-eyed perspective about which leadership competencies you've mastered and which still need work?
- How often do you ask for feedback so you can understand how others see you?

Hitting pause and taking time for self-analysis can pay significant leadership dividends.

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2. Focus on personal resilience.

It is inevitable that you will face challenges and setbacks throughout your career—especially in today's volatile and uncertain world. With resilience, though, you have deep personal reserves that keep you centered and able to cope with whatever comes your way.

So how do you build resilience? Begin by focusing on simple steps that can improve your physical and mental well-being:

- **Get enough sleep.** Too little sleep can kick off a downward spiral. Your self-awareness and inhibitions plummet and your judgment becomes skewed. Get a good night's rest and you will be much more effective.
- **Get moving.** Exercise can boost energy, mood, and cognitive performance. It lowers stress and helps you get that restorative sleep you need. So build movement into your daily routine. Try scheduling a walking meeting. Take the stairs instead of the elevator.
- **Be mindful.** Do you spend precious time preoccupied with the past or worrying about the future? Paying attention to the here and now can help you stay calm, focused, and refreshed. As you move through your day, focus on the positive and not the negative.

  Try breathing exercises, meditation, mindful walking, journaling, or other activities that cause you to slow down, take notice, and take stock.
- **Nurture connections.** Having hundreds of contacts on social media sites isn't enough. Focus on building truly meaningful relationships. Spending quality time with others inside and outside the workplace can lower your stress levels and elevate your mood.

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3. Improve your learning agility.

Our research has found that experience is the best teacher. Effective leaders routinely look for new and challenging experiences and absorb lots of essential lessons along the way. If they find their old ways of doing things don't work, they simply stop and analyze what they can do differently, experiment, and try new strategies.

There are specific steps you can take to boost your own learning agility.

- Become a seeker. Intentionally **look for new and challenging situations** that jolt you out of your comfort zone.
- Also, **make sense of both the good and the bad** you encounter as you try new things.
- Ask "why" and "how." Take time **to reflect and to internalize** what you've learned so you will be poised to use the information to navigate new situations.

Leaders who are agile learners are also eager to benefit from the perspectives of others around them. Try talking to a boss, mentor, or peer who can share insights and give you feedback on what you might do differently. You might also join a professional group or community of practice where you can share ideas and advice with peers inside or outside your company who are in similar roles.

LEARNING TO LEAD YOURSELF: IN ACTION

The Cascading Impact of Learning Agility

We met George soon after he was promoted into a middle management role with a sales team. He had spent the bulk of his career in sales and discovered he had far more functional experience than those he was leading. As a result, his direct reports continually looked to him for guidance.

George worried he was spending more time telling people what to do than focusing on strategic issues, systems, and processes important to the organization's success. He worked with a coach to brainstorm new approaches that could help him become more effective. He shifted his perspective from "telling" to "teaching"—creating new learning experiences that would benefit both himself and his team.

The sales supervisors reporting to George soon began to problem-solve on their own. They also began to share their new insights with their direct reports—creating a culture that valued learning. George finally had time to focus on impactful changes that could produce better outcomes for his team and the broader business.

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SECTION 2

Learning to Lead Others

How did you get where you are today? Often a promotion into a leadership role comes as a reward for being a standout individual performer who knows how to get things done. Unfortunately, though, **what got you into a leadership role is unlikely to sustain you once you arrive**.

Being responsible for leading others is quite different from being an individual performer. Yet lots of us continue to rely on the skills that first got us noticed—even if our new job is significantly different from the one we left behind. We feel like we need to have all the answers and be in the middle of everything rather than delegating responsibility to others and empowering our team.

If you try to micromanage every aspect of the work going on above, below, and around you, though, you can create intense stress for yourself and for others. Our researchers have found that you can even derail your career. Failure to build and lead a team effectively is among the top 5 reasons leaders are demoted, fired, or fail to move ahead.

To succeed, you'll need to let go of old, well-established patterns. Rather than getting involved in every detail of every project, it's time to shift your focus to collaboration, coalition-building, and unleashing the potential in other people.

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Taking a more collaborative approach is especially important in today's decentralized workplaces, where you are likely to need support from others who aren't even on your team. A "command and control" approach clearly won't work. Instead, a new set of skills come into play. There are two in particular that you will want to make certain you've mastered:

4. Work on your communication skills.

Leaders who communicate effectively are able to listen well and consider the perspectives of others. They focus on "we" instead of "you" and "me." They convey their ideas and emotions with clarity, authenticity, and passion. They also are flexible—able to adapt their communication style based on who they are speaking to and the context. They often are great storytellers who share examples to illustrate information in a relatable way.

5. Develop your skill at influencing others.

Great leaders know how to capture hearts and minds. Rather than "commanding" others to fall in line, they take the time to understand the interests and motivations of others. They treat people fairly, give them opportunities to learn and grow, and make them feel valued. They build the social capital they need to inspire, persuade, and engage others to work together toward a shared objective. As a result, reporting relationships don't matter.

LEARNING TO LEAD OTHERS: IN ACTION

Letting Go of the Reins

Dana is a middle manager works with a pharmaceutical company. During a CCL leadership development program, she got a real wake-up call. Feedback collected from her boss, peers, and direct reports showed they found her controlling and difficult to work with.

Dana came away knowing she needed to change, but found it hard to let go of old patterns. She finally set aside time to reflect on why it was so important for her to be in control.

Part of her concern: She had two supervisors reporting to her. One was highly competent, but the other lacked the skills he needed to succeed. Rather than continuing to micromanage his work as she had in the past, Dana asked the highly competent manager to become his mentor.

When we checked in several months later, Dana and her department were in a better place. The less skilled manager was thriving under the mentorship of his more experienced peer. The mentor was learning new collaborative leadership skills that would position her for the next step in her own career.

Dana's direct reports and their teams were producing better outcomes and enjoying their work more. And so was Dana. She had taken a big step forward in unlearning old behaviors and replacing them with new, more effective ways of leading.

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SECTION 3

Learning to Lead Within a System

In most any organization there are lots of complex parts that make up the whole. There are multiple layers of management, multiple functions, and multiple geographic regions that all need to work together. As a leader in the middle of an organization, **you've got to be able to see, understand, and leverage those complex components to get things done**.

Many of us, however, fall into a trap. We're absorbed by the day-to-day minutiae and fail to stop and consider the bigger picture. Everyday work demands encourage us to focus on what's now and what's expedient. We make assumptions about how the organization should operate and don't take the time to figure out how it *does* operate.

When you take time to understand the many systems at play in your organization, you can navigate more easily. You know what kind of support you are going to need for important initiatives and who needs to be involved early on. You can quickly navigate around potential roadblocks and find opportunities to collaborate. When new ideas come your way, you can think through the likely ramifications for the broader organization.

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6. Learn to think and act more systemically.

How do you build your system leadership skills? Look for opportunities to broaden your point of view. For example, you could:

- **Volunteer for a strategic planning team** where you will be called on to weigh competing priorities.
- **Join a cross-functional team to practice working around boundaries** such as one focused on quality management or process reengineering.
- **Take the initiative** to partner with a colleague from another organization on a project proposal. Institute regular reviews of your own group's activities and how they align with the organization's broader strategy.

Most importantly, **build a network** with individuals from across the organization who can help you see issues and opportunities from a new perspective.

How do you build your system leadership skills? Look for opportunities to broaden your point of view.

LEARNING TO LEAD WITHIN A SYSTEM: IN ACTION

Shifting Your Focus

When we met Phil, he was an experienced engineer who had been promoted to department head. It was his first job leading other managers. He says the first six weeks were a dream, but the next six months were a nightmare. He was overwhelmed by the volume of work and felt he needed to weigh in and share his recommendations about everything.

Phil was losing sleep and wasn't his usual "clear thinking" self. Even his normal, cordial behavior suffered. A friend and colleague noticed the change and spoke with Phil about what he observed. They discussed how much Phil was working and what he was choosing to spend his time doing.

With the help of his colleague, Phil came to understand that he had supervisors reporting to him who were responsible for the day-to-day work. It was time for him to let go. He began to take a broader, system-wide view of the organization and how work was accomplished. He focused on removing roadblocks and building collaborative bridges that would benefit his team and the broader organization—earning kudos from his boss, his direct reports, and his peers.

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CONCLUSION

Making it in the Middle

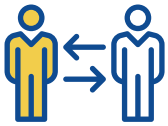
How do you cope with feeling pulled in every direction? Do you have the skills, competencies, and perspectives needed to lead effectively from the middle of your organization?

We offer world-class leadership development, especially designed for mid- to senior-level managers and the unique challenges you face. **We can help you learn to lead yourself, lead others, and lead within complex systems.** And we equip you with the 6 key skills you need to be able to manage organizational complexity and lead successfully from the middle.

At CCL, you don't just train, you transform. You'll walk away with new insights you can use to broaden your impact and produce results that truly matter to your organization.

Learn more about our flagship Leadership Development Program (LDP)®, based on our 50 years of experience working with mid- to senior-level managers, directors, and leaders like you. It's the longest-running program of its kind in the world, with over 50,000 alumni. Visit ccl.org/ldp to learn more.

Lead Yourself



Lead Others

Lead Within a System

To learn more about this topic or the Center for Creative Leadership's programs and products, please contact our Client Services team.

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The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) is a top-ranked, global provider of leadership development. By leveraging the power of leadership to drive results that matter most to clients, CCL transforms individual leaders, teams, organizations, and society. Our array of cutting-edge solutions is steeped in extensive research and experience gained from working with hundreds of thousands of leaders at all levels. Ranked among the world's top providers of executive education by the *Financial Times* and *Bloomberg Businessweek*, CCL has offices in Greensboro, NC; Colorado Springs, CO; San Diego, CA; Brussels, Belgium; Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; Johannesburg, South Africa; London, United Kingdom; Moscow, Russia; Singapore; Gurgaon, India; and Shanghai, China.

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