New Needs for Middle Managers

Associations Now | Mark Athitakis | March 20, 2026

Their role has changed. So should the ways associations connect with them.



This has been a rough half-decade or so for middle managers—and for associations trying to engage them.

In the early days of COVID-19, they were charged with executing a response strategy that was ever-changing and developed on the fly. In the aftermath of the pandemic, they were asked to coordinate within hybrid and remote work environments. Now they're being told that AI is gunning for their jobs. Gartner predicts that by the end of 2026, AI will have eliminated "more than half of current middle management positions."

This is understandably troubling for the middle managers themselves. But it should also concern associations, many of which are custom-designed for the middle manager—someone eager to climb the ladder and improve their skills while finding the community that can help them get ahead professionally. If the nature of the middle manager is changing, are associations providing them with the kinds of support they need now?

Recent writing on middle managers suggests that their current skills challenge runs in two directions: confronting the communication gap with top leadership and developing the soft skills to better manage those who report to them.

Middle managers are pressured to improve their emotional intelligence without rewarding them for it.

Regarding the first challenge, consultant Farah Harris suggests that a lot of trust needs to be bridged. Writing inFast Company, she argues that many organizations are structurally misaligned, "where middle managers are handed responsibility and expected to 'figure it out' with limited authority, limited support, and limited psychological safety."

That broken structure, Harris notes, puts pressure on managers to improve their emotional intelligence without particularly rewarding them for it.

And regarding soft skills, managers are no longer focused on productivity goals, writes leadership expert Cheryl Robinson in Forbes—AI can handle that kind of number crunching. Rather, middle managers are charged with being systems experts, people who understand "how choices in one area affect the whole company. Rather than just supervising, they need to design operations that bring together technology and processes."

This isn't just a big ask, it's a different ask. Rather than being assigned to monitor KPIs and compliance issues, middle managers have to become holistic thinkers, managing their teams while also grasping how their work fits into the larger organizational scheme, and being prepared to share that knowledge with leadership.

Robinson proposes a few items that managers now need in their toolkit: digital skills (especially around AI-driven automation), leadership chops, cross-functional capacity, and strategic thinking.

That's an opportunity for associations, if they choose to embrace it. What kind of training do your rising members need in a more disrupted organization, and has your association been able to provide it?

Because, Gartner's gloomy predictions aside, the middle management job isn't going away, buffeted and battered as it is. But it is changing. As leadership consultant Nik Kinley recently wrote inFast Company, "middle managers … do more than execute strategy. They translate, push back, and contextualize executive directions in the face of operational realities. Without this, organizations risk unfiltered top-down mandates that may be operationally impractical."

In other words, they do the thinking that AI can't. Will associations help them do it better?