



2026

Why So Many Middle Managers Are Burning Out

Why Your Managers Are Drowning (And What You Can Do About It)

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What You Will Learn

- Why middle management has become the most pressured role in many organisations right now
- The four specific pressures driving burnout among people in the middle of your business
- What happens to the rest of your team when those in the middle are overloaded
- Five practical steps to redesign the role before strain turns into resignations

Middle management roles don't get as much attention as they should, even though those roles are getting considerably harder. Around 70% of C-suite executives said they were seriously considering leaving their company this year to protect their wellbeing.

Yet many organisations continue to add more to these roles. Bigger teams. Constant change. New demands layered on top of old ones.

Yet support doesn't grow at the same rate. Eventually, the strain spreads. Fewer people step into people leadership for the first time. These roles become harder to fill. In some businesses, employees actively ask to step back.

This is no longer an individual issue. It's a design problem with real consequences for growth.

What's Actually Happening in the Middle

In most teams, being a manager hasn't suddenly become harder. The demands around these roles have grown, and not always in a coordinated way. 75% of people in middle management now say they experience burnout, making them the most stretched group in organisations.

Pressure rarely comes from one direction. From above, priorities shift faster than they used to. Senior leaders ask for updates and progress against targets that keep moving. Change programmes overlap. Minimal context is shared about what matters most this week or what can wait. People managers become the place where everything seems to land.

From below, the work is more human and harder to rush. Team members need clarity, feedback, and support. Hybrid working makes those conversations tougher. Performance issues take longer to address.

WHY SO MANY MIDDLE MANAGERS ARE BURNING OUT

Wellbeing concerns show up earlier and more often. It accumulates. 72% of people in management roles say they feel used up by the end of the working day.

Most middle managers only spend up to 41% of their time leading people. The rest goes on administrative tasks that create distance from the work they were hired to do. Sitting in meetings "just in case" and producing weekly reports that few people read.

Over time, what gets squeezed out is the part of the role that matters most: developing people, spotting problems early, and making thoughtful decisions.

Promoted for performance, not leadership

Most people step into management because they were trusted to deliver, not because they asked to lead others. Around 60 percent struggle or fail within their first two years. The reason isn't hard to find. Most were never given the chance to build proper leadership skills. Confidence drains away quietly, not because the individual lack's ability, but because the role assumes leadership will emerge naturally from technical skill.

High accountability, low control

Targets. Delivery. Engagement scores. Retention. Culture. All of it sits on the people leader's shoulders. What is far less clear is how much control they are allowed to exercise. Managers describe being responsible for results while having little say over budgets, headcount, or shifting priorities. Research shows they are 36% more likely to burn out than the employees they manage.

Why Business Owners Should Care

When people in the middle of your business are struggling, the effects travel in every direction.

- **Strategy stalls:** Plans that never make it out of the boardroom are often not a communication failure. They're a capacity failure. When those responsible for translating direction into action have no room to explain trade-offs or reset priorities, the message gets passed on quickly and the work carries on as before.
- **Team engagement drops:** When people leaders are stretched, feedback gets squeezed out, performance issues drift, and good people stop feeling seen. The team may still hit numbers for a while, but the energy changes before the results do.
- **The leadership pipeline empties:** Middle management is where future leaders decide whether leadership is worth pursuing. Fewer candidates are currently putting their hand up for first-time people management roles. Others ask how quickly they can move back out if it doesn't work. Organisations lose around £15billion annually through middle management turnover, and that figure doesn't include the slower damage.

Five Practical Moves to Stop Your Leaders Drowning

1. Clarify what the role is for

Pressure in the middle usually rises fastest when everything is treated as urgent. Clarity means being able to answer a few straightforward questions without hesitation: What are the two or three outcomes this role is here to deliver? When something new arrives, what is expected to stop? Which decisions sit with this person and which ones don't? When those answers exist, pressure drops almost immediately.

2. Slow down promotion decisions

Before moving someone into people management, ask honest questions. Do they actually want to lead others, or are they looking for progression? Can they prioritise, give feedback, and handle tension without avoiding it? Trial roles, leading short projects, or temporary acting positions make it far easier to see who is genuinely ready.

3. Invest in development that works under pressure

Most people in these roles have been on a course. Fewer have had help applying it on a difficult week. Development that sticks is close to the real work: short inputs and practice on live situations, followed by conversations that ask what worked. The skills that matter most are rarely advanced. Handling difficult conversations early, saying no without burning trust, and staying clear when priorities conflict.

4. Give people somewhere to think out loud

One of the most significant gaps in middle management is space. Space to talk honestly and test thinking before acting. Regular mentoring with someone more senior, peer groups where leaders compare notes, and access to coaching when the role starts to feel heavy all make a meaningful difference. Without some form of this, people carry everything privately, and exhaustion builds slowly.

5. Review spans and build sustainability into how performance is measured

If team sizes grow, something else must give. Review how many direct reports each person has, how many projects they are juggling, and how much of their week is spent reacting rather than leading. If the only measure that gets attention is delivery, people learn to sacrifice themselves to hit numbers. Sustainable performance looks different: conversations about workload before it tips too far, and boundaries that are visible from the top.

Protecting Your Management Team

Most people in the middle don't reach a breaking point overnight. The role stretches gradually. A bigger team. Less space between meetings. Nothing breaks all at once, so it's easy to miss what's building.

The people who leave these roles aren't always the weakest. Often, they're the ones who see the cost clearly and decide it's no longer worth paying.

Organisations that hold onto strong leaders tend to notice pressure building before it becomes a problem. They stop assuming the role looks the way it did a few years ago. They ask what it actually involves now and are willing to cut noise and adjust scope before people burn out.

There's no complicated answer here. Pay attention to what's happening in the middle while there's still room to act or wait until the signal comes in the form of another resignation that's harder to explain than it should be.

A little about Sarah Bishop and Recruit Recruit Ltd



Whether you're a sole trader hiring your first team member, a VC-backed startup needing to scale fast, or a corporate looking for top-tier C-suite talent, one thing stays true:

Your business grows when your people grow.

I help founders, CEOs and business leaders build brilliant teams through:

- **Recruitment:** finding and placing the right people for the right roles or embedding a talent team into growing businesses
- **Sales & Leadership Training:** developing high-performing teams that sell, lead and deliver
- **Speaking & EmCeeing:** energising events and conferences with insight, humour and practical takeaways
- **Coaching:** supporting leaders to grow confidently, communicate better, and build culture that sticks

Over the years, I've supported businesses at every stage, from bedroom startups to scale-ups and established firms navigating change. What they all have in common? A vision to grow and the ambition to get the right people on board to make it happen.

I bring no-nonsense advice, energy, empathy and results, whether I'm:

- Hiring a game-changing leadership role
- Training a founder-led team to sell with confidence
- Speaking on stage about team-building, fearless follow-up, or people strategy
- Coaching a business owner through their first ever hire

So, let's talk if:

- You're ready to grow and want to hire with confidence
- You need training or coaching to get more from your team (or yourself!)
- You're planning an event and want a speaker or EmCee who brings both energy and value

Drop me a message or connect - let's build something brilliant together.

Now - #1 Bestseller on Amazon -

Scale Up!: The Founders' Guide to Accelerating Growth by Building Dream Teams by Sarah Bishop

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