

TIME FOR STRATEGIC THINKING

Introduction

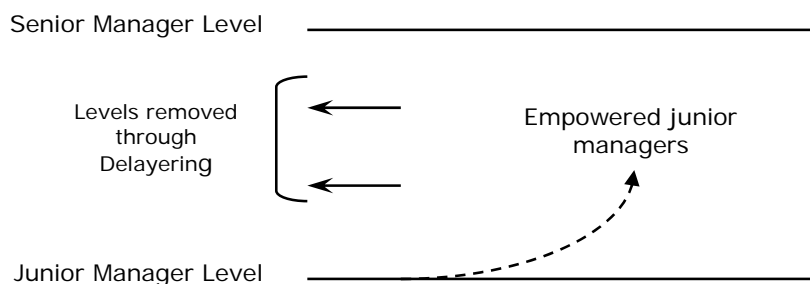
During the '90s the world changed faster and became more complex than ever before. The best companies responded by learning faster, giving people more responsibility and the authority to act quickly . . . **empowerment** became the Holy Grail.

If employees were more empowered to make decisions and act, they could:

- become more flexible and responsive to customer needs, rather than rigid and rule-bound;
- take the initiative to tackle problems when they saw them, rather than ignore them or regard them as someone else's responsibility;
- network and collaborate across organisational boundaries rather than work in uncompromising silos.

Great stuff – what organisation wouldn't want its people to behave like this?

At a time when most organisations needed to cut overhead costs dramatically, empowerment was seen as an opportunity for **delaying**. The idea was simple: layers could be removed from the organisation structure and the people below empowered to step up into the gap – enlarging and enriching their jobs, challenging and stretching their minds, fulfilling more of their potential . . . perfect win-win downsizing:

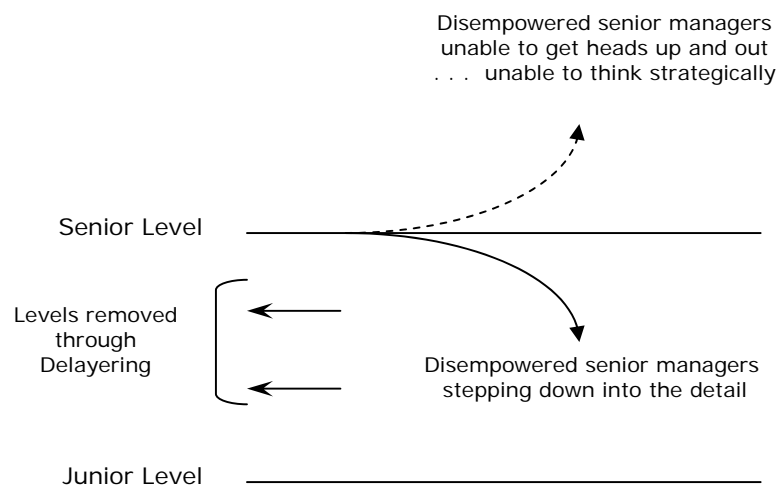


So, what went wrong?

Without development and support, many junior managers were unable to step up to the challenge of filling the gaps left above them. But the work still had to be done, so senior managers had to pick up the work not being done below them. Of course, they still had their own jobs to do so they worked longer hours and missed out parts of their own jobs that were not operational. **So out went the time for strategic thinking.**

Unintended consequences of delaying

Effectively, delaying had resulted in disempowering senior managers rather than empowering junior managers!



Many delayed organisations are still suffering from the disempowerment of senior managers, often with serious internal and external consequences.

EXTERNAL CONSEQUENCES

When managers work predominantly at an operational level, the strategic management of the business will suffer:

- Focus on the internal minutiae causes managers to lose touch with the external world, switching off their external 'sensors' and failing to pick up the signs of change in the marketplace:
 - either responding in crisis mode, having picked up the signals late;
 - or in strategic drift, following a path that gradually deviates from the mainstream direction of the market.
- An operational perspective means that opportunities and threats are seen as operational issues, so larger patterns and trends get missed:
 - continued operational responses to strategic trends leaves an organisation 'knee-jerking' to keep up with competitors;
 - the 'fire-fighting' activity can appear to be effective but it only masks an underlying lack of performance which never gets addressed.

Of course, this has allowed some senior managers to stay in their comfort zones, with their heads down in the detail where they prefer to be. They use the pressures caused by delaying as an excuse for not stepping up to the challenges and demands of their own jobs. These are the truly derailed

managers, not the under-developed junior managers who could not step up into the gaps left by delayering.

INTERNAL CONSEQUENCES

Removing layers removed from the old stepping stones for development and promotion:

- When junior managers are unable to see a viable career path:
 - the better, more marketable ones go, leaving poorer ones behind;
 - senior managers are left with fewer effective resources and become even more involved in the day to day detail.

- Without a development path, junior managers are unable to learn how to think and operate in a higher capacity:
 - junior managers can derail when promoted - although they may have the potential, they lack the development to take such a big step;
 - companies can be left with little choice but to recruit from outside leaving junior staff with even fewer career opportunities.

Overcoming the consequences without adding more layers

Developing people for future positions means getting them to think and act like the most successful people at that higher level:

- to understand the broader context;
- to understand more complex situations;
- to reach the same conclusions they would if confronted with the same situation and information.

In addition, success at more senior levels requires wider interpersonal skills than at junior levels:

- the ability to manage managers and to get the best out of them;
- the ability to operate across organisational boundaries and to get things done through influence rather than authority;
- a higher degree of political awareness and an understanding of how to get things done;

Unfortunately, the skills outlined above are rarely acknowledged and talked about in organisations, and they are not easily picked up through management education and training.

We believe the only way to develop these skills effectively is through a combination of **delegation** and **coaching**:

Delegation: passing some of the senior manager's work down to the junior manager – not simply off-loading the mundane or routine activities but delegating tasks that will stretch and challenge the junior manager with their complexity and demands for higher level thinking.

Coaching: helping the junior manager learn from their own experiences - holding back from giving the answers but asking questions instead to help them think through the issues and exercise their judgement.

Gaining time for strategic thinking

A combination of **delegation** and **coaching** can develop junior managers to the point where work can be delegated with complete confidence, allowing senior managers more time to lift their own heads up and out of the business, with several long-term benefits:

- Time to take a 'helicopter view', to monitor changes in the marketplace and to spot patterns or trends as they unfold.
- Time to spend with customers, to get closer to their business and to understand their real needs, even those they don't recognise themselves.
- Time to involve junior managers in the strategic process, to develop them further and to bring new perspectives and insights.

How LMT can help

Many of our clients have struggled with the consequences of delayering. When we talk about the consequences, managers nod their heads knowingly. Equipping managers to overcome these consequences has a direct impact on the business.

- **360° feedback** - an important way for managers to understand how their style is perceived by others, particularly their direct reports.
- **Delegation and coaching skills** - equip managers with the techniques needed to develop their people.
- **Executive coaching** - enabling managers to experience the process and value coaching while developing their own skills.
- **Team workshops** - helping teams to work more effectively together.