



# THE MISSING MIDDLE

When it comes to training, key members of our manufacturing workforce are being overlooked.

That's according to industry experts who believe companies are not dedicating enough time and resources to train team leaders, plant managers and other middle-management-level workers who direct day-to-day operations on the plant floor.

While much of the current discussion in the manufacturing sector focuses on attracting and training entry-level employees, middle managers are left with few training opportunities. Workers who demonstrate comprehensive technical skills are often promoted into the role of middle management. However, they aren't necessarily given the training and tools to succeed as a leader of a team.

"Equally, if not more important to the overall health and success of a manufacturer, are training and development opportunities for shop floor leaders," said Justine Burdette, regional director of the **Michigan Manufacturing Technology Center – West**. "This is where I see a large gap and little resources being spent. These are the folks who are both important to a manufacturer's productivity but also lead people and reinforce corporate culture."

For James Kolodziej, operations manager at **Flexco**, finding training opportunities for middle managers forms an essential part of the manufacturer's talent-development strategy. The

Illinois-based manufacturer of industrial conveyor belts and other products maintains a production facility in Grand Rapids.

Kolodziej has sent his team leads, plant managers and other middle managers to a number of different user groups hosted by The Right Place, Inc. and the Michigan Manufacturing Technology Center-West. As part of the user groups participants meet monthly at different manufacturing facilities and discuss topics pertinent to their leadership positions on the shop floor, such as conflict resolution, Kolodziej said. Participants also discuss best practices, problem solving, as well as specific challenges they've worked through with a group of their peers.

"They get a chance to learn, ask some questions, and then walk the floor and see at the middle-management level what these other companies are doing in practice and it really spurs some ideas for them," Kolodziej said. "Even if the industries are very different, they tend to have the same issues. There's always some sort of a takeaway."

Moreover, Kolodziej sees some of the biggest benefits for his workers stemming from the networking aspects of these groups. He noted that it was important to "make those connections with supervisors in other companies so that outside of training, you have people to reach out to and network with at that level."

"That has been very powerful," Kolodziej added,

noting that Flexco has sent three supervisors through similar programs and all of them have experienced additional benefits from participating in the networking aspect of the user groups.

Specifically, the Michigan Manufacturing Technology Center – West offers three distinct user groups focusing on middle managers: The Plant Manager Network, Supervisor Leader User Group, and the Shop Floor Lean User Group.

The **Plant Manager Network** helps workers develop a peer network and sounding board for managers to discuss ideas, techniques and tools for improvement. The **Supervisor Leader User Group** is a comprehensive program designed to train first-time and experienced supervisors in best practices for leading others on the plant floor. Lastly, the **Shop Floor Lean User Group** is dedicated to teaching supervisors the ins and outs of lean principles, and how to implement those principles on the plant floor.

"The Michigan Manufacturing Technology Center – West offers a variety of programs targeted at this shop floor management audience," Burdette said. "Our programs offer learnings both in leveraging tools to create operational efficiency as well as learning to lead and inspire teams."

Also, companies often struggle with how to best prepare workers transitioning from working alongside their colleagues on the plant floor to managing them.

"Going from peer to supervisor is definitely a big challenge," Kolodziej said. "All of a sudden you're supervising the same people you used to work alongside."

That transition can often prove troublesome for some new middle managers who may have the technical skills required to manage workflow on the plant floor but lack the communication or people skills necessary to lead a team.

That's where Michigan Manufacturing Technology Center – West's user groups can come into play. Through formal training and networking with their peers, new middle managers can gain perspective and strategies to better succeed in their new roles.

"The people who are really good at their jobs, may not have natural leadership skills or step into those other roles and a lot of times they fail," Kolodziej said. "That's where we would go to some of these outside resources and who would tailor different training and give them the tools."

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