

# Lonely at the top? Try the middle!

By *Hodar Lam*

**A recent study finds middle managers who feel less powerful are often lonelier in their work than those who feel more so. This can have ramifications not only for individuals who feel unrecognised and alienated from those who employ them, but also for organisations themselves, particularly if the affected mid-level managers take out their frustrations in the workplace.**

I first realised how lonely managers could be while working in the HR department of a large company. Every week, my supervisor scheduled an hour-long meeting for the two of us in which we would go over the progress we were making. Often, after dispatching our business in the first five or ten minutes, he would spend the rest of the hour talking about problems he was having in his work life and his personal life.

After a few of these sessions, I began to realise he was lonely and that he was using our meetings to alleviate some of his feeling of disconnection.

that loneliness at work is very common: 11-50 per cent of all workers report that they feel lonely at work, and around 50 per cent of managers.<sup>1</sup> Yet there is little in-depth knowledge or empirical evidence of the phenomenon, partly because unlike stress, loneliness is often stigmatised as a personal failing.

## **Toxic handlers**

For professionals who spend a lot of their day with people, middle managers seem to be a surprisingly lonely group. Their experience is a good example of how loneliness, which is an emotion

superiors who tell them what strategy they should pursue and the teams they have to supervise, many feel they have no colleague with whom they can share their troubles.

Although they generally pay close attention to their superiors, they often feel they don't get the same degree of attention in return and that their effort goes unrecognised; feelings that give them an even deeper sense of alienation.

To borrow the scholar Peter Frost's term, these lonely middle managers are often "toxic handlers", forced by their position to absorb negative emotions from others who are both above them and below them in the organisation. Often, they don't even realise that this is a root cause of their trouble; they see loneliness as almost part of the job, the price of authority.

It almost goes without saying that this has some important ramifications. For any individual, loneliness is bad. It can lead to emotional exhaustion, which in turn can cause sleep problems, a sharper temper, less ability to reason, and more difficulty exercising self-control. Such troubles are not desirable in any worker, but in a manager they might have even more serious ramifications, because that person is in a position to make things difficult for the rest of their team.

When lonely managers act out their frustration, they are in a position to trigger more workplace stress, limit employee creativity, inspire more unethical behaviour, and spur higher turnover. Among other things, earlier research on lonely managers suggested that they sometimes base hiring decisions ►

*"...they see loneliness as almost part of the job, the price of authority."*

Maybe that wasn't the best way for him to handle his personal problems, but it did make me aware of loneliness as a major problem for middle managers. Later, after I started studying organisational behaviour at RSM, I looked further into this subject, and discovered

stemming from the discrepancy between expected and actual relationship quality, is different from objective conditions of isolation, ostracism, or a lack of social support. This is why mid-level managers can feel lonely without being alone at work: caught between

# Lonely at the top? Try the middle! (continued)

By **Hodar Lam**

---

on their personal needs rather than on competence, and make other assignments based on favouritism.

Most earlier studies assumed all types of work relationships had the same influence on workplace loneliness, overlooking the fact that the workplace has a special social context. Work relationships include hierarchical (ie, leader-follower) relationships that are inherently different from peer relationships. The experience of power and control involved in hierarchical relationships often leads to different patterns of workplace interactions and emotional experiences than peer relationships tend to produce.

A few studies have examined the connection between hierarchy and workplace loneliness, but the findings had been inconsistent. Some show a negative relationship between organisational level and loneliness, while others show no relationship between the two. And no one had tried to understand: *what factors led some managers to feel lonely at work while many of their peers felt fine at work?*

## Who is lonely?

To better understand the dynamics of loneliness on the corporate ladder, my two PhD supervisors and I conducted a three-phase online survey of 200 mid-level British managers in 2017. The average age of the group was 36 and there were slightly more women than men.

The results of our survey confirmed that their loneliness is detrimental to the daily functioning of the lonely group in our sample, who suffered from emotional exhaustion, ego depletion and sleep

problems. However, we also found that managers who believed they felt personally powerful enough to influence others for reasons that were not dependent on their official role, tended to feel much less isolated than managers at the same level who felt less personally powerful.

The question was why? My co-authors and I had a hypothesis that this difference depended on a somewhat circular dynamic: we believe that people who feel more powerful personally tend to reach out more through self-disclosure and this act of sharing makes them feel less lonely – a reverse mirror image of the pattern in which those who feel less powerful often withdraw, and feel more lonely.

nals trust, support, and attention from the person above.

Sharing with people down a rung or two, however, did not seem to have the same social-bonding effect, contrary to our initial hypothesis. Unlike my old boss, most managers who answered our survey reported they did not feel less lonely if they shared personal information with people who report to them. Mid-level managers tend to internalise self-disclosure to followers as part of their leadership roles and responsibilities. Our theory is that they might interpret downward disclosure simply as fulfilling a responsibility, rather than providing intrinsic value and meaning to the relationship.

*“For professionals who spend a lot of their day with people, middle managers seem to be a surprisingly lonely group.”*

Our survey showed that their subjective power had led them to engage in self-disclosure, particularly to their superiors. Self-disclosure is more than just sharing – it is about sharing personal, sensitive information, such as one’s worries, setbacks, and sensitive personal facts. This conclusion remained after we statistically ruled out alternative explanations, such as the level of hierarchy and need to belong of our participants. We believe upward disclosures are highly valued, because being able to take the risk to do so sig-

## Coming in from the cold

These nuances in our findings give us hope that this loneliness can be reduced in ways that will make managers happier and the entire organisation more productive. Although our primary focus was mid-level management, these results can also be applied further up the ladder. The observation that it’s ‘lonely at the top’ might have some truth to it: upward disclosure is simply not viable in top management, thus reducing the opportunities to feel emotionally and socially connected.



While additional research should further clarify causes and possible cures of managerial loneliness, the results of our study suggest that there are already a number of things companies can do to make their lonely managers' days less oppressive. By making a few minor and inexpensive changes, companies can encourage more upward sharing of personal information, reducing managerial loneliness and the expensive, painful consequences it can have on both the individual and the enterprise.

In particular, we think four measures could help make many managers feel closer to their organisation:

- Foster stronger ties between middle managers and senior managers. Structured mentoring programmes between people at different levels of the hierarchy can go a long way

toward making people feel more at home.

- Encourage participation in larger organisation-wide conversations, giving managers a sense that they are part of the organisation.
- Give managers real decision-making powers. If our theory is correct and loneliness stems from a perception of personal powerlessness, more legitimate control should help both managers' subjective feelings about their position and their effectiveness in it.
- Most of all, don't accept loneliness as part of a business leader's job description. Organisations should talk about loneliness more often, in open forums, internal communications, development programmes, etc.

Particularly in our present era of nearly flat organisations, it makes no sense for the company to acknowledge the isolation felt by employees as anything but a risk to mental health and a hindrance to productivity. ■

**Hodar Lam** is a PhD candidate in Department of Organisation and Personnel Management, Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University. [EMAIL lam@rsm.nl](mailto:lam@rsm.nl)

<sup>1</sup> Based on Saporito's (2012) online article: <https://hbr.org/2012/02/its-time-to-acknowledge-ceo-lo>

This article draws its inspiration from the working paper *Breaking free from loneliness at work: The role of subjective power and upward self-disclosure*, written by Hodar Lam, Meir Shemla, and Steffen R. Giessner.