

Ongoing Discussion “Thought Piece”

Prepared by

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Notes for the Ongoing Discussion Sessions with Barry Oshry

A recurring pattern of powerless in the middle.

Middles are often seen as the stumbling block in change programs.

They're seen as fractionated, disorganized, resistant, can't get their act together. I was made aware of this pattern as far back as the 1970s and as recently as this year.

“Explanations” of Middle powerlessness

1. It's a genetic Middle defect
2. It's a mystery disease that strikes people once they reach Middle positions
3. It's a Human Resources selection failure; they are just not promoting people with the right stuff.

Systemic explanation.

These issues are not personal; they are systemic. Middleness is a **systemic condition**.

When we are blind to that condition it weakens Middles **individually** and **collectively** (that is, there is no powerful and effective middle peer group. The challenge Middles face is to see, understand, and master the middleness condition.

The Middle systemic condition: Tearing.

Individually. Individual Middles are torn between the conflicting demands, pressures, and priorities of others. They are expected to please all parties.

Collectively. Middles are drawn away from one another and out toward individuals and groups that are to lead, coach, supervise, manage, or otherwise service.

The effects of tearing.

Effects on individual Middles.

1. Middles lose their independence of thought and action. They are focused on others' needs, priorities, and demands. It's as if they have no independent perspective of their own.
2. Tearing is a painful condition. Middles “resolve” it by aligning up, or aligning down, or bureaucratizing themselves, or burning out in an effort to please everyone.

Effects on the Middle peer group.

1. There is no Middle peer group. Each Middle faces the pressures of the middle condition alone.
2. A frequent Top complaint: Can't get consistent information up from Middles; can't get initiatives implemented consistently; don't get enough entrepreneurial behavior from Middles.

How to create Power individually and collectively in the Middle: Integrating the disintegrated.

1. Middle peers develop a regular pattern in which they **disperse**: move out to those individuals and groups they lead, manage, supervise, support, coach and otherwise service; then come back and **integrate** with one another (no Top, just Middle peers): sharing information, diagnosing system-wide issues, problem-solving, sharing best practices, mutual coaching, collective influence. This becomes a regular disperse/integrate pattern in which integration strengthens dispersal, and dispersal strengthens integration.
2. Consequences of effective Middle disperse/integrate strategies.
 - a. Strengthen individual Middles; they are supported and better informed.
 - b. They offer more informed and consistent leadership.
 - c. They eliminate the Top complaints cited above.
 - d. They take on more system-wide responsibility, relieving Tops to do more uniquely Top business.

Why Middles don't disperse/integrate.

1. Is it in their job description?
2. Are they paid to integrate?
3. The nature of their condition (tearing) makes integration difficult.
4. Do they want to integrate? An "I" consciousness goes along with the Middle condition, as distinct from the "WE" consciousness that develops in the Bottom condition. In the "I" consciousness, our separateness from one another predominates. We experience ourselves as unique, having little in common; we tend to be competitive with one another and evaluative of one another on surface issues; and we tend to think that there is no collective power among us.

5. A vicious cycle develops: So long as Middles remain apart, they fall into an “I” consciousness; and being in an “I” consciousness reinforces their staying apart.

The critical importance of system consciousness. The need to understand how system conditions shape our consciousness.

Reflect on the following:

As Middles,

We think that the reason we don't integrate is how we feel about one another, and if we felt differently then we would integrate.

The truth is just the other way around.

We feel the way we feel about one another because we don't integrate, and if we did integrate we would feel very differently.

Reflections:

1. Do you see this pattern in organizations you are in or working with?
2. Do you see payoffs in creating Middle disperse/integration strategies?
3. Why are Tops not involved in integration and how can they be involved in the overall strategy?
4. What strategies would you employ to create this form of individual and collective Middle power?
5. What first steps could you take?

Biography

Barry Oshry began his work in the 1960s at Boston University where he developed large-scale organizational simulations for undergraduates in business. Throughout the 1960s he continued his research and program development at BU and at NTL Institute. In 1970 he created The Power Lab, and since the mid-1970's he has developed and conducted organizational simulations with Tops, Middles, Bottoms, and Customers. These programs have been providing "system sight" to organizations throughout the world. A pioneer in the field of systems thinking, Barry has been invited to address numerous professional conferences. He has written extensively on power, system change, and other social system issues. Among his writing are 'The Possibilities Of Organization,' 'In The Middle,' and 'Space Work.' His most recent books, 'Seeing Systems' and 'Leading Systems,' have met with critical acclaim and are regularly used in a variety of graduate courses.

For over 35 years, the work of Power + Systems has been grounded in Barry's pioneering studies and observations. The other ingredient to his organization's success is a network of experienced organizational and leadership development professionals who have mastered the understanding and delivery of Barry's methodology—from workshops to theater, presentations to trainer certifications. This network of over 400 professionals spans the globe from every corner of the US to across Canada and Europe, in India, Australia and South Africa.