

KNOWLEDGE CENTRE · OCTOBER 2026

Resistance isn't where you think

Why your middle managers stand closer to the front line than to senior management, and how to close that gap

For HR leaders who see policy failing to land. With Deepler's collective intelligence model, Dutch figures and an approach you can start next month.



1 in 4

middle managers find their workload (far) too high

over 40%

of middle managers are unhappy with their work-life balance

1 in 3

top managers in companies facing major change don't fully back the strategy

For HR directors and HR managers who see policy failing to land, and for the senior management that wants to change that.

Source of figures: Integron, Employee Experience in Nederland 2025. See page 14

IN ONE MINUTE

The whole story on one page

No time for fourteen pages? Here is the essence.

THE PROBLEM**Policy isn't landing.**

Senior management sees resistance on the front line and looks for the cause among employees.

THE INSIGHT**The gap is higher up.**

The biggest gap is often between middle and senior management. The middle then sides with the team.

THE APPROACH**Ask, see, act, measure.**

Make the gap visible per level, discuss it together, strengthen the middle and measure again.

FOUR THINGS TO REMEMBER

- 1 The middle is running on empty.** A quarter of middle managers experience an excessive workload.
- 2 The middle hears too little from above.** Team managers want better information from the levels above them.
- 3 Development works, if you do it well.** Spread over months, with practice and feedback. 360-degree feedback for development, not for appraisal.
- 4 You are in the middle too.** Between senior management and the organisation. What you give your team leaders, give yourself as well.

Strengthen the middle, strengthen the whole organisation.

CHAPTER 1

Sound familiar?

An ordinary week in an organisation going through change.

MONDAY

1

Senior management chooses a new direction. The plan is clear, the slides are ready.

TUESDAY

2

The team leader explains it to her team. But she has her own doubts: why, actually?

WEDNESDAY

3

On the front line, people grumble. The team leader nods along. She gets it.

FRIDAY

4

The management team talks of resistance. The conclusion: the employees don't want it.

But what if the problem isn't on the front line?

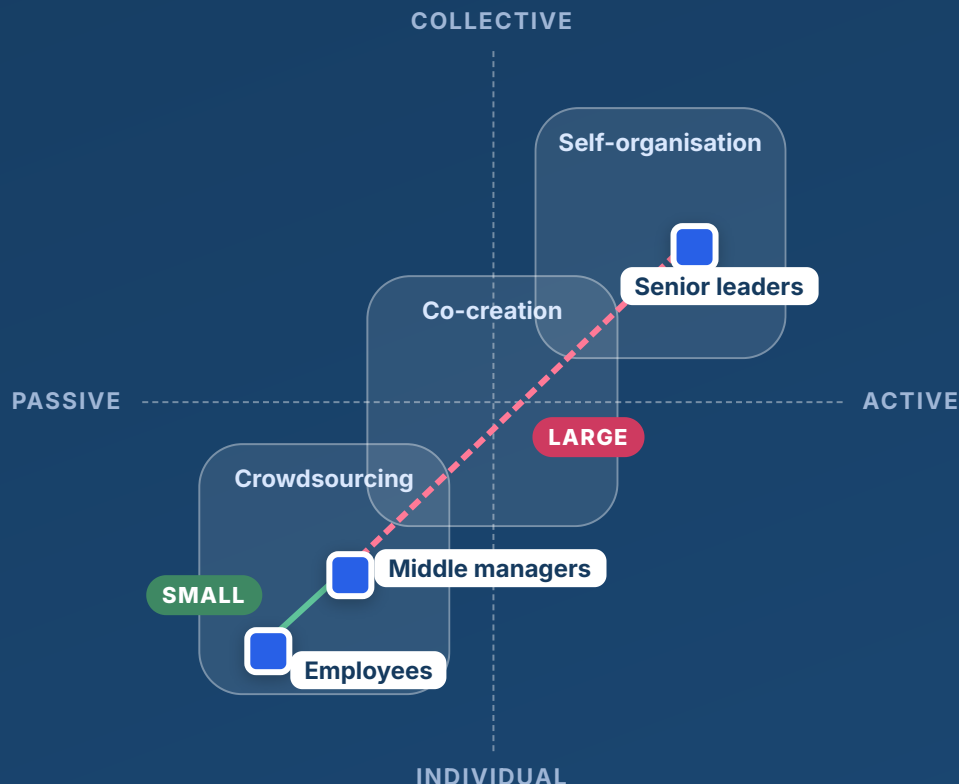
The team leader in this story is not against the new direction. She simply stands closer to her team than to senior management. And nobody took her along in the why.

This scenario is invented. The pattern is not: we see it in many organisations.

CHAPTER 2 · THE INSIGHT

The gap lies between the middle and the top

The model shows how an organisation thinks and decides together: from passive to active, from individual to collective.



Crowdsourcing

People mainly give separate input. Others decide.

Co-creation

Groups develop together and share responsibility.

Self-organisation

Teams act together and make their own decisions.

Place your employees, middle managers and senior management on Deepler's collective intelligence model and you see it every time: **employees and middle managers sit close together, senior management sits further away.**

Deepler model, based on practice. Illustrative: positions differ by organisation.

CASE How a housing association compared the views of management and staff



CHAPTER 2 · WHY

Why the middle sides with the front line

It is not unwillingness. There are four explanations, and they reinforce each other.

1

They come from the front line

Practice

Many team leaders rose from their own team. They know the work and the people. Senior management's language is newer to them.

Deepler practice

2

They feel connected

Limited

In Dutch secondary schools, team and department heads feel strongly connected to their teachers and like to stand up for them.

Wieland, 2018

3

They hear too little from above

Limited

Team managers feel insufficiently seen, heard and valued. They want better information from the levels above them.

Integron, 2025

4

They keep switching roles

Limited

In the middle, you are the boss one moment and the subordinate the next. That switching costs energy and makes people cautious.

Anicich and Hirsh, 2017

AND THE TOP?

The gap does not only arise in the middle. In organisations going through major change, 1 in 3 top managers do not fully support the strategy themselves. If you want to bring the middle along, be clear yourself first.

BLOG Why we involve employees early in changedeepler.io/en/involving-employees-in-change →

CHAPTER 3

What is at stake

Dutch figures from 2025 show what happens when change fails to land, and how the middle is faring.

IN ORGANISATIONS GOING THROUGH MAJOR CHANGE

-6

employee eNPS, against +3 on average

nearly half

of employees are looking for another job

1 in 5

report more sick days

IN THE MIDDLE AND AT THE TOP

1 in 4

middle managers find their workload (far) too high

over 40%

are unhappy with their work-life balance

1 in 3

top managers do not fully support the strategy

Integron, Employee Experience in Nederland 2025, poll of 5,000 workers in the Netherlands. A poll: treat it as a signal.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR HR

During change, the middle carries the heaviest load and is heard the least. Yet that is exactly where it is decided whether the new direction lands or people drop out.

MODULE How to measure how teams experience their manager and the direction

deeper.io/en/teams-and-leadership →

CHAPTER 3 · IN THE BOARDROOM

Six things you will hear

You will hear firm statements about team leaders and resistance. Here are six we often come across, with what you can reply.

YOU HEAR "The resistance is with the employees."

YOU SAY The biggest gap is often between middle and senior management. Measure it per level before you draw conclusions.

Deepler practice

YOU HEAR "If only the team leaders explained it properly."

YOU SAY Team managers themselves want better information from above. What doesn't come in clearly doesn't go out clearly either.

Integron, 2025

YOU HEAR "A good specialist automatically becomes a good manager."

YOU SAY Managing is a different profession. Those who grow out of a team stand close to it and further from senior management.

Deepler practice

YOU HEAR "One leadership training course and we're done."

YOU SAY Training works, especially with practice, feedback and sessions spread over months. One day without follow-up works less well.

Lacerenza et al., 2017

YOU HEAR "Let's use the 360 for appraisals too."

YOU SAY When the 360 is about development, the effect is about three times as large as when an appraisal is attached to it.

Smither et al., 2005

YOU HEAR "They aren't complaining, so all is well."

YOU SAY A quarter of middle managers experience an excessive workload. Over 40% are unhappy with their work-life balance.

Integron, 2025

USE IT AS AN OPENER

Put this page on the table in your management team and ask: which of these six do we hear most often? The answer shows where to start.

CHAPTER 4

What really helps the middle?

Ranked by strength of evidence. Three green bars: meta-analyses. Practice: what we see working with clients.

MEASURE	EVIDENCE
Leadership development, spread out and with practice Meta-analysis of 335 samples: better learning, changed behaviour at work and better results. Works best with practice, feedback and spacing. Lacerenza et al., 2017	
360-degree feedback for development Meta-analysis of 24 studies: a small improvement on average. Larger when used for development, with a goal and a conversation with the team. Smither, London and Reilly, 2005	
Support with work and private life Meta-analysis of 85 studies: specific support from the manager reduces work-family conflict. This also applies to team leaders themselves. Kossek et al., 2011	
Senior and middle management discussing the direction together Don't just pass decisions down: discuss where you stand and where to go. Deepler practice	PRACTICE
A clear role Those who know what is and isn't expected of them have time left to lead. Deepler practice	PRACTICE
Peer consultation with other team leaders Colleagues to bounce ideas off make the middle a less lonely place. Deepler practice	PRACTICE

TO BE HONEST

Leadership development is well supported. 360-degree feedback only works with a goal and a follow-up. The rest is based on practice: logical and cheap, but measure whether it helps.

CASE **Municipality: managers rate themselves above their team**

deepler.io/en/leadership-development-360-feedback →

CHAPTER 5 · THE APPROACH

Ask, see, act, measure

Four steps to narrow the gap in the middle. For each step: what you can already do this month.

STEP 1 Ask	Ask employees, middle managers and senior management anonymously how the organisation works now, and how it should work.	THIS MONTH Choose three statements and put them to all levels.
STEP 2 See	Put the levels side by side. Between which levels is the gap largest, and on which topic?	THIS MONTH Discuss the outcome with middle management first.
STEP 3 Act	A session with senior and middle management. Clarify the role, develop with 360-degree feedback and organise peer consultation.	THIS MONTH Plan the session with the worksheet on page 11.
STEP 4 Measure	Measure again after six to twelve months. Has the gap narrowed?	THIS MONTH Schedule the follow-up measurement now.

LET TEAM LEADERS CO-WRITE IT

An approach for the middle made without the middle widens precisely the gap you want to narrow.

DEVELOP, DON'T APPRAISE

Keep 360-degree feedback separate from the appraisal cycle. Then people dare to be honest, and the effect is greater.

DEEPLER Ask, see, act, measure: that is how Deepler works too

deepler.io/en →

CHAPTER 5 · WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

What the gap looks like in figures

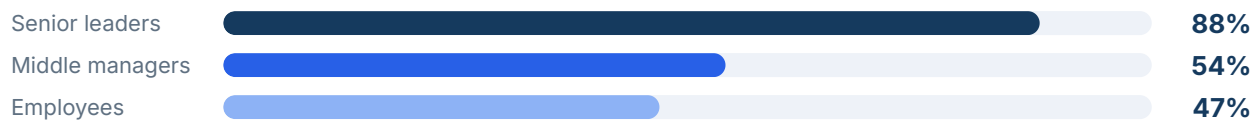
Three statements, three levels. An example of what you see when you ask instead of guess.

GAP PER LEVEL · % AGREE

EXAMPLE, FICTITIOUS FIGURES

I understand why we are choosing this direction.

34-point gap



I get the information I need.

32-point gap



I have room to make my own decisions.

18-point gap



What stands out

Middle managers and employees sit close together. Senior management scores much higher every time.

What it means

Senior management thinks the direction is clear. The middle sees it differently, and the front line follows the middle.

Where to start

Not on the front line, but with the conversation between senior and middle management about the why.

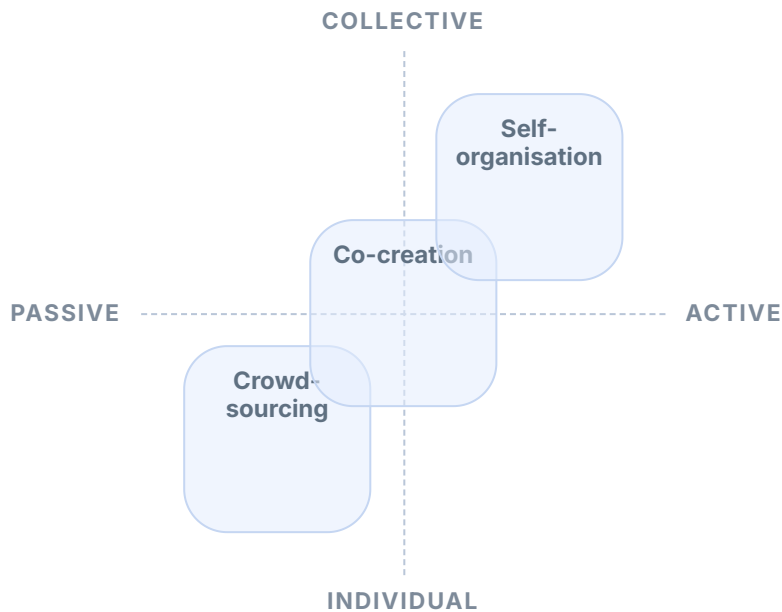


The **Team Leadership** module in **Deepler Research** measures shared strategy, communication and role clarity, among other things. Anonymous, and only visible where groups are large enough.

CHAPTER 6 · WORKSHEET

An hour with the top and the middle

One model, two levels at the table. Print it on A3 or draw the model on a whiteboard.



● current ● desired

1 · Place 10 min

Everyone places two dots: blue for where the organisation stands now, orange for where it should be. Use the letters S, M and E.

2 · Compare 10 min

Where are the dots of senior and middle management far apart? And those of middle managers and employees?

3 · Understand 20 min

What explains the gap? Dig deeper: what do you see that the other person doesn't?

4 · Agree 10 min

One thing middle management needs from senior management, and vice versa.

OUR AGREEMENTS

What middle management needs from senior management

What senior management needs from middle management

REAL FIGURES RATHER THAN ESTIMATES?

Put the same questions anonymously to all levels. Then you discuss facts instead of impressions.

WORKSHEET · BASELINE

How strong is your middle management?

Ten statements, five minutes. Fill it in with senior management and a few team leaders. Where your answers differ, that is where the conversation lies.

	STATEMENT	No 0	Partly 1	Yes 2
1	ROLE Team leaders know what is and isn't expected of them.	☐	☐	☐
2	ROLE Team leaders have time left for their people.	☐	☐	☐
3	CONNECTION Senior and middle management discuss the direction together, not just from the top down.	☐	☐	☐
4	CONNECTION Team leaders can explain why we are choosing this direction.	☐	☐	☐
5	DEVELOPMENT Every team leader has a personal development goal.	☐	☐	☐
6	DEVELOPMENT Leadership development runs over months, with practice and feedback.	☐	☐	☐
7	SUPPORT Team leaders have colleagues to bounce ideas off.	☐	☐	☐
8	SUPPORT Their own manager asks how they themselves are doing.	☐	☐	☐
9	VISIBILITY We know how teams experience their manager.	☐	☐	☐
10	VISIBILITY We know how far apart senior management, middle managers and employees are.	☐	☐	☐
		Total score _____ / 20		

0 to 7 · Starting out

Start with role and support: that is where team leaders immediately gain time and breathing space.

8 to 14 · Under way

Bring senior and middle management together, and make development ongoing.

15 to 20 · Front-runner

Measure per level whether it works, and share what you learn.

BLOG [How to prepare 360-degree feedback for your team leaders](#)

deeper.io/en/360-degree-feedback-preparation →

CHAPTER 7 · AND YOU?

You are in the middle too

As an HR leader, you stand between senior management and the organisation. You translate strategy into policy, and signals from the front line into input for the boardroom.

RECOGNISE

Convincing senior management today, reassuring a team tomorrow. Loyal to two sides, and sometimes understood by neither.

ARRANGE

A regular place to bounce ideas off someone, outside the line. And a limit to what you solve for others.

LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Ask for feedback yourself, from your own team too. What you ask of team leaders, show yourself first.

FOUR QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON

Which side do I take most often, and why?

What does senior management need to know that it doesn't know now?

Who can I turn to myself?

Which team leader needs my attention right now?

Forget the translators and you lose the message.

METHODOLOGY

Sources

FIGURES AND MODELS

Integron (2025). Employee Experience in Nederland 2025. Poll of 5,000 workers, via HR Community, April 2025.

Wieland (2018). Waar blijft de middenmanager? Master's thesis, Utrecht University, via Voion.

Deepler. The collective intelligence model, a practice-based model built on experience with clients.

Anicich and Hirsh (2017). The psychology of middle power. *Academy of Management Review*, 42(4).

RESEARCH BEHIND THE APPROACH

Lacerenza, Reyes, Marlow, Joseph and Salas (2017). Leadership training design, delivery, and implementation: a meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 102(12), 1686-1718.

Smither, London and Reilly (2005). Does performance improve following multisource feedback? *Personnel Psychology*, 58(1), 33-66.

Kossek, Pichler, Bodner and Hammer (2011). Workplace social support and work-family conflict: a meta-analysis. *Personnel Psychology*, 64(2), 289-313.

How we rate the evidence. Strong: meta-analyses. Moderate: large studies and field research. Limited: polls, theory and small-scale research. Practice: what Deepler sees with clients. **What we do not claim:** the Integron figures come from a poll. The gap between the levels is a pattern from practice, not a law. The figures on page 10 are fictitious.

About Deepler. Deepler was founded in 2021 by four change managers. We help organisations listen to employees at every level and see what is needed. Better performance through better listening.

deepler.io/en/about-us

MORE FROM THE KNOWLEDGE CENTRE

How far apart are your senior and middle management?

Scan the code and read how a healthcare organisation developed its team leaders in a targeted way, with 360-degree feedback and a follow-up measurement.

deepler.io/en/use-cases/360-feedback-team-leaders →

