



## LEADERSHIP COMMENTARIES

# Leadership Training for Middle Managers: *An Organisational Turning Point*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Middle managers' main desirable attributes are to have management and leadership skills, be able to influence their teams, demonstrate a methodical and disciplined approach, and convey the organisation's values. Their main functions are to transmit the strategy of the executive management, implement the strategy, plan, execute, control the organisation's activities, define and delegate functions, and lead and motivate their teams.<sup>1</sup>

Middle managers operate in a hybrid environment where the remnants of traditional leadership - based on verticality, hierarchy, and a more rigid and distant style - coexist with new transformational leadership approaches that prioritise collaboration, adaptability, and less rigid hierarchical authority. This new leadership style focuses on the ability to inspire and motivate teams to achieve more ambitious goals and bring about meaningful change.<sup>2</sup>

In an increasingly "VUCA" world - volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous, and fragile - middle managers are an essential pillar for the implementation of

organisational strategy. They must not only manage projects but also facilitate collaboration and build trust so that their teams feel integrated in the decision-making process.

In this context, middle managers can be real agents of change. However, they often lack the necessary tools to perform their role successfully. In many cases, it is wrongly assumed that they know how to manage and motivate teams, lead in complex situations, and carry out difficult conversations, to name a few challenges. Frequently, there is a misassumption that because they have done well in previous operative roles, they will do well in coordination roles without any type of training. The lack of training in management and leadership exposes them to constant stress, exacerbated by overwork and pressure to meet challenging targets. In Global South contexts, both the challenges faced by organisations can be even more pronounced.

Previous research states that Argentinians perceive leaders as effective when they are considerate, supportive, accessible, participative, have good

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<sup>1</sup> Hal G. Rainey and Steven A. Watson, "Transformational Leadership and Middle Management: Towards a Role for

Mere Mortals," *International Journal of Public Administration* 19, no. 6 (2007): 763-800.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard M. Bass and Ronald E. Riggio, *Transformational Leadership* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005).

communication, and get involved. However, there are few local leadership studies from a first-hand perspective.<sup>3</sup> This applies to many Global South countries, as most detailed leadership studies in organisational settings remain focused on Global North countries, particularly in the United States.

There is also a lack of research about middle managers within academia generally, but especially within Argentinian and Global South countries' private and public organisations. This commentary seeks to contribute an Argentine and broader Global South perspective to the challenges that middle managers face. Most importantly, the main purpose of this commentary is to contribute real testimonies to establish and make visible the importance of training middle managers.

This commentary is based on desktop research as well as the author's personal experience working within middle management positions in Argentina. It is supplemented by four interviews with middle managers from different types of Argentinian organisations and builds on the work and observations of Pereyra, who provides one of the few Argentinian case studies on middle manager leadership training.<sup>4</sup> The work asks why organisations should provide leadership and management training to support learning, growth, and well-being for middle managers.

## 2. MIDDLE MANAGERS AND LEADERSHIP STUDIES

Lave & Wenger state that learning is the result of participation in a community of practice, where people with more experience socialise their knowledge with newcomers. The "legitimate peripheral participation" enables a conversation between newcomers and older participants within a community of practice. This is the process by which newcomers start to be part of the community of practice and start to join what happens inside the community. Through time, they become full participants, learning the community's knowledge and new skills.<sup>5</sup> This is what middle managers, who in their first leadership role can be defined as "newcomer leaders," hope to experience.

In Argentina, it is unusual for organisations to strategically create and develop communities of practice. Most Argentinian middle managers do not have planned and organised spaces to learn from older participants and their peers' knowledge exchange. Nor do they typically have access to individual formal leadership training, as most organisations do not have the capacity to provide this kind of opportunity to their employees. This implies that their learning process depends entirely on themselves as individuals, something that is extremely difficult and leads to inherently unpredictable outcomes.

Transformational leadership potentially offers a useful approach to tackling some of these issues, in an Argentinian context and beyond. Transformational leaders go beyond focusing only on the need to achieve immediate results; instead, they raise consciousness and personal consideration, and become role models to other members of the organisation. This can lead to more sustainable, long-term success. Bass & Riggio describe transformational leaders as leaders who stimulate and inspire their followers and encourage the development of their own leadership skills. Transformational leaders help their followers to grow, taking care of their necessities and empowering them. This type of leadership supports followers' learning process in a personalised approach.<sup>6</sup>

This work proposes that Transformational leadership is the style that middle managers invariably desire to see and experience from their senior executive management, and also the type of leadership that would be most useful for their self-development. People within organisations look for leaders who take care of and encourage their followers to learn, design the necessary learning path to grow professionally, and support them during the process. This is also related to the idea of learning through a peripheral position in a community of practice, where experienced participants permit newcomers to learn from them, acquire new knowledge faster, and put that knowledge into practice.

## 3. THE CHALLENGES FACED BY ARGENTINIAN MIDDLE MANAGERS

<sup>3</sup> Carlos E. Ruiz, Robert G. Hamlin, and Andrea Carioni, "Behavioural Determinants of Perceived Managerial and Leadership Effectiveness in Argentina," *Human Resource Development International* 19, no. 4 (2016): 267-288, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2016.1147778>.

<sup>4</sup> Carlos Pereyra, *Fortalecimiento del liderazgo en mandos medios aplicado a una empresa autopartista de Córdoba* (master's thesis, Universidad Católica de Córdoba, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Bass and Riggio, *Transformational Leadership*.

As stated, prior research suggests Argentinians perceive leaders as effective when they are considerate, supportive, accessible, have good communication, and get involved. This challenges the idea that Argentinian people prefer authoritarian leaders instead of democratic ones, something that was previously widely spread.<sup>7</sup> Ruiz et al. argue that for Argentinian people, personal relationships are more important than institutions, regulations, and laws. Also, group responsibility is preferable to individual responsibility.<sup>8</sup> This suggests that, when hiring, organisations rely more on personal references and networks than on impersonal credentials.

Although few leadership studies in Argentina focus on middle managers, Pereyra conducted a study in an autoparts company in the city of Córdoba, whose main objective was to understand the impact of leadership training, and the lack of it, in middle managers. Pereyra's key observation was that the Argentinian middle managers did *not* have the leadership skills to lead the people who operated the production line. They did not know how to communicate properly, did not have the tools to establish and transmit objectives inclusively, and had a distant approach that did not encourage collaboration. The manager's lack of leadership skills affected their relationship with the people who operated the production line and led the latter to look for help from their Trade Union delegates. Ultimately, this leadership gap resulted in strong pressure from the Union on executive management to change the way they were leading the company, and most of the former middle managers were fired.<sup>9</sup>

Newly hired middle managers received leadership training workshops from the time they started on labour laws, and tools to facilitate discussions and manage disputes. They also received individual and group coaching based on the Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) discipline to encourage their personal development, improve their communication, and learn practical tools to be in charge of teams. This training improved the role of the new middle managers in the organisation, enabling them to work closely with the operational line and return the Union to its previous role. Overall, Pereyra's case study highlights how the lack of previous training had significant consequences

for the company's former middle managers. They lost their jobs, and the company as a whole was at a turning point.<sup>10</sup>

In order to build on Pereyra's study of Argentinian middle managers and expand our understanding of such organisational relationships, four interviews with middle managers were conducted for this work. These were with individuals from four broadly representative Argentinian organisations: an agroindustry, an IT company, an NGO, and a government office. These interviews sought to understand how leadership training impacts middle managers' careers in different types of organisations.<sup>11</sup>

The four interviews showed four key findings. Firstly, none of the four interviewees received previous leadership and management training in their organisations. As a consequence, they struggled with situations they did not know how to manage and carried on in different ways. For instance, the government manager reflects on this, saying that since she started this new role, she has not received any leadership or management training:

"I would appreciate having leadership and communication training, mainly to learn how to communicate in high-pressure contexts and to be assertive in the message to be communicated. If I receive it and develop the leadership and communication skills I need, I think that I would not be as stressed as I am. I want to learn these tools to be more confident about myself and to put my energy into the development of the project's strategy and the development of my team."<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, most of the interviewees expressed that they do not feel they are ready to make decisions on their own. The NGO middle manager reflects on how middle managers struggle with the lack of training and confidence to make decisions independently: "One of my biggest challenges is not having the chance to rely every time in a boss as I did before. I am now responsible for making decisions on my own, but being alone sometimes is difficult, and I still have the necessity to be supported by a direct boss."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Ruiz, Hamlin, and Carioni, "Behavioural Determinants of Perceived Managerial and Leadership Effectiveness".

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Pereyra, *Fortalecimiento del liderazgo en mandos medios*.

<sup>10</sup> Pereyra, *Fortalecimiento del liderazgo en mandos medios*.

<sup>11</sup> These interviews were conducted as part of the author's MSc dissertation: Francisco Sanchez Moreno, *Leadership and*

*Management Training for Argentina's Middle Managers* (master's thesis, King's College London, 2025).

<sup>12</sup> Sanchez Moreno, *Leadership and Management Training for Argentina's Middle Managers*.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Thirdly, most of the interviewees struggle with the difference between their previous operational role, where they were responsible for a few defined tasks and mainly followed instructions, to their new coordination role, in which they lead teams and are in charge of projects. Some of them miss doing just operational tasks, and others do not know how to carry on with the 'political' aspect of their new role. This last aspect appeared in different ways, such as the lack of communication skills to communicate with the executive management, or the lack of emotional intelligence to solve labour relation issues, or even rejecting the idea of leaving the operational work for something else.

The agro middle manager testimony reflects this difference very clearly. "Sometimes I do not realise that I am the boss, and I do not realise that my comments and attitudes have a greater impact on the team."<sup>14</sup> She states that the biggest challenge in her current position is to assimilate that she is not responsible for operational tasks, but rather to provide a vision for her team, to design a strategy for each project, and to be an effective leader.

Also, as part of the 'political' aspect of their role, middle managers start to be part of and are exposed to discussions with more experienced people, who have their own interests, such as the senior management or the board of the organisation they work in. They need to have the means to propose and discuss what they think would be best for the projects they are in charge of, and also the emotional intelligence to manage professional and personal situations that come with their new leadership role. The IT middle manager's testimony reflects how she struggles with this aspect:

"I find it very difficult because I do not have a very good relationship with the organisation's board, and I do not have the emotional intelligence to change the way we interact. Also, I tend to avoid conflict because I do not know how to manage it. I do not feel that I have the security that others see in me."<sup>15</sup>

The final key point emerging from the interviews is that, in the absence of formal training, each middle manager made their own efforts to compensate for this gap. Some of the interviewees have read leadership and management books on their own. Others looked for internal or external mentors or started coaching sessions

to receive support. Doing this, they sought to minimise the gap between their knowledge and experience and the expectations of their role.

The NGO middle manager states that he generated interest in "reading leadership, organisational culture and management books, and speaking by my own with people with management experience inside and outside the organisation who were able to teach me."<sup>16</sup> This is a clear example of how the peripheral activity operated for him, as he sought mentoring from experienced people who were willing to teach him and also set time to understand how the organisation worked by himself, reading and studying.

Middle managers are crucial and decisive in how organisations work. Community of Practice theory explains the importance of creating spaces where middle managers can learn and be supported by experienced people in the organisation. As a complement, Transformational Leadership theory demonstrates the positive impact of leadership guidance to grow and develop leadership skills. The four interviewed middle managers persevered in the role despite the difficulties involved, and still go through situations that they do not know how to manage, paying a resultant personal and professional cost. However, many other middle managers cannot manage this type of situation and end up quitting or being dismissed, as was the case described in Pereya's case study. This can be changed with planned and organised leadership and management training provided by organisations.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The contribution and survival of the twenty-first-century organisations depend on the selection and development of their leaders. Any organisation, no matter its size and scope, faces leadership challenges as the world is in constant change. Therefore, the only way to become efficient and successful over time is to invest in leadership training at all levels to prepare leaders and teams from the time they start work in any given organisation. Institutionalising leadership training culture within an organisation is one of the most impactful ways to attract and maintain talent, and it assures a competitive advantage over time.<sup>17</sup> This is particularly important and a turning point for organisations in Argentina, and more broadly in the

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Sanchez Moreno, *Leadership and Management Training for Argentina's Middle Managers*.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Francis Amagoh, "Leadership Development and Leadership Effectiveness," *Management Decision* 47, no. 6 (2009): 989-999, <https://doi.org/10.1108/00251740910966695>.

Global South, as it encourages social development and economic growth, both extremely necessary.

Organisations should consider the most optimal way to create and exchange knowledge and skills. If middle managers do not have a space where they can learn and feel supported, they will not have the necessary means to achieve their objectives. They will also sense that they 'feel alone' when carrying out their complex tasks. This experience of loneliness reinforces the complexity of their role, giving rise to negative results and detrimental personal consequences. However, formal leadership and management training inside organisations, with communities of practice that also facilitate personalised learning pathways, could change this situation, contributing to middle managers' learning, growth, and well-being. This is necessary for Argentinian organisations, but also for organisations across the Global South and, indeed, worldwide.

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