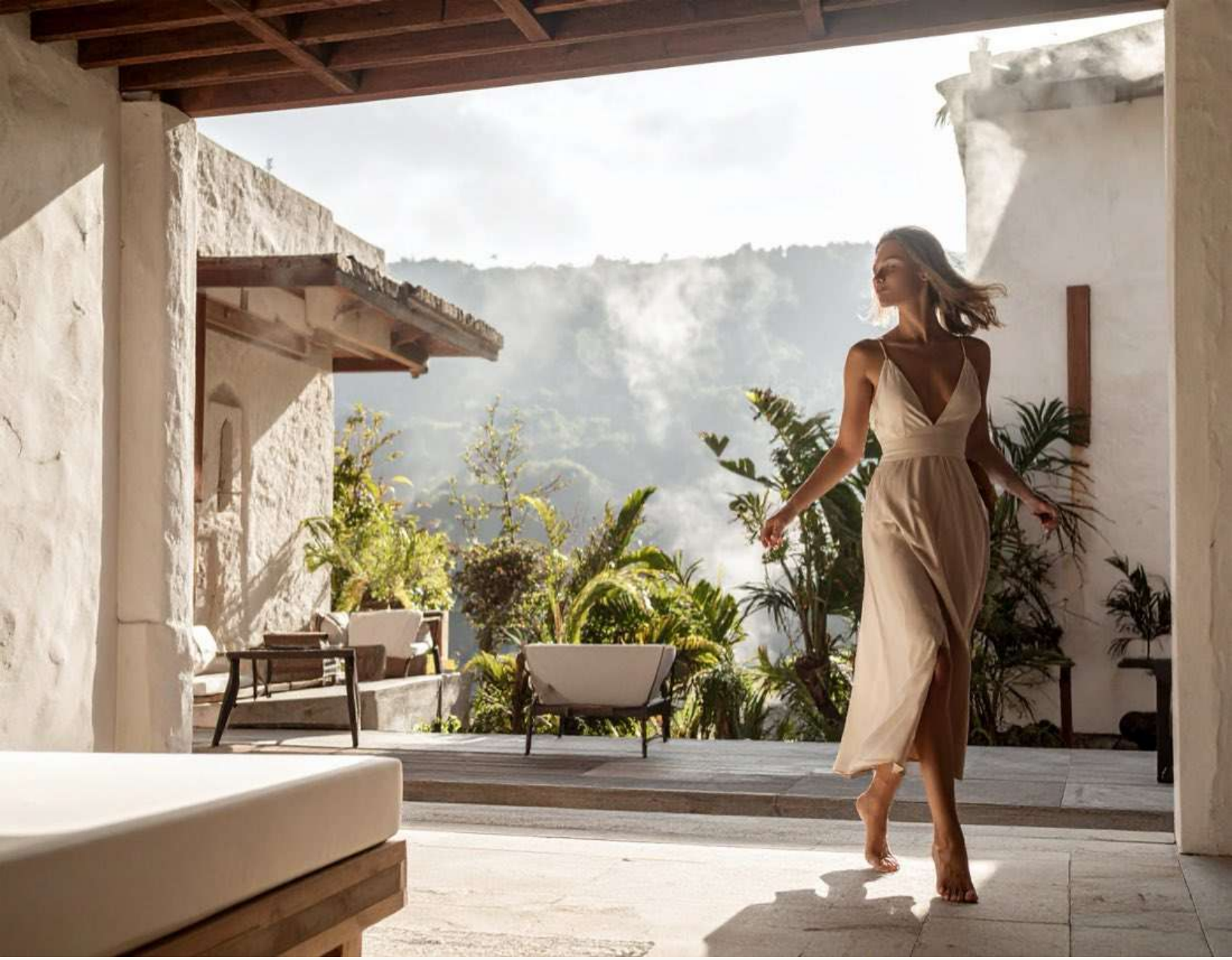


THE MANAGER'S WEEK · CHAPTER THREE

The Translator's Thursday

The middle manager is the organisation's translator, and the upward half of the translation is where the gain is.

Ammanuel Santa Anna

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Chapter Three of The Manager's Week. The whole book, with every chapter, is at business.hautelumiere.life/library/the-managers-week (DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989102).

A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

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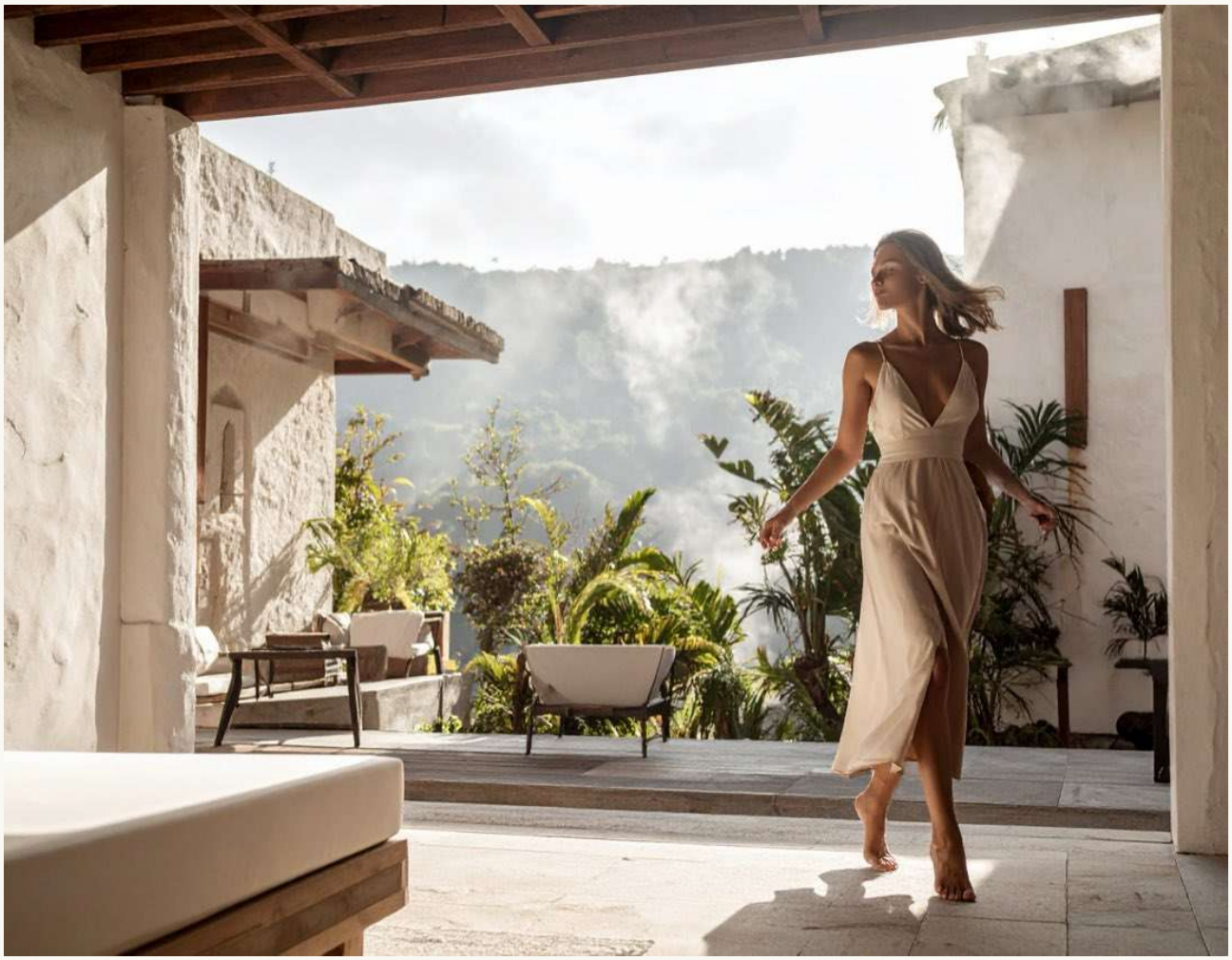
ABSTRACT

The middle manager is the organisation's translator, and the upward half of the translation is where the gain is. It is ten past four on a Thursday, and the manager of a claims team at a regional insurer is sitting in a small glass room with the door shut and three drafts of the same email open. She came back an hour ago from a two-day leadership offsite in a hotel by the motorway, and she carries a decision from it. The telephone line her team answers, the one customers ring after a flood or a break-in, will close in the spring, and claims will be made through an online form. The decision was explained well. The figures were persuasive. She agreed with most of it in the room. Her team meets at half past four. Fourteen people, several of whom have answered that telephone line for longer than the director who announced its closing has worked for the firm. The first draft of the email is enthusiastic and sounds like the slides. The second is careful and sounds like a lawyer.

CHAPTER THREE

The Translator's Thursday

The middle manager is the organisation's translator, and the upward half of the translation is where the gain is.



The Translator's Thursday

HAUTE LUMIÈRE · THE MANAGER'S WEEK · CHAPTER THREE

Ten past four, Thursday

It is ten past four on a Thursday, and the manager of a claims team at a regional insurer is sitting in a small glass room with the door shut and three drafts of the same email open. She came back an hour ago from a two-day leadership offsite in a hotel by the motorway, and she carries a decision from it. The telephone line her team answers, the one customers ring after a flood or a break-in, will close in the spring, and claims will be made through an online form. The decision was explained well. The figures were persuasive. She agreed with most of it in the room.

Her team meets at half past four. Fourteen people, several of whom have answered that telephone line for longer than the director who announced its closing has worked for the firm. The first draft of the email is enthusiastic and sounds like the slides. The second is careful and sounds like a lawyer. The third begins *I know some of you will have questions*, and she deleted the rest of it because it sounded like an apology. Her throat is tight in the way it gets before she has to say something she half believes.

She is a composite, drawn from the way these afternoons are described in the research below and in the house's own practice, and no firm is meant. If you have managed people who are managed by someone else, you have sat in that glass room.

Ammanuel Santa Anna's canon has an exercise for senior leaders that asks them to imagine the middle of their own organisation, and the questions it asks are the ones in her throat:

> *Inhabit the perspective of middle management — the translators between strategic intention and operational reality. What pressures do you feel from above and below? What information is lost in translation? What impossible contradictions are you expected to resolve?*

This chapter makes one claim. The middle manager is not a relay through which the organisation's signal degrades. She is its translator, and translation runs both ways. Most organisations use only the downward half, carrying decisions to the people who will live with them, and leave the upward half, carrying what those people know back to the people who decided, to chance. The upward half is where the gain is, and it costs almost nothing to collect.

Dinosaurs or dynamos

The middle of the organisation has rarely had a good press. In the early 1990s, as firms reengineered their processes and removed layers of management, the middle manager became the standard example of cost without value: the person who passed messages up and down, and whom a good information system could replace. Steven Floyd and Bill Wooldridge, writing in 1994, put the prevailing mood in their title: *Dinosaurs or Dynamos?*[18]

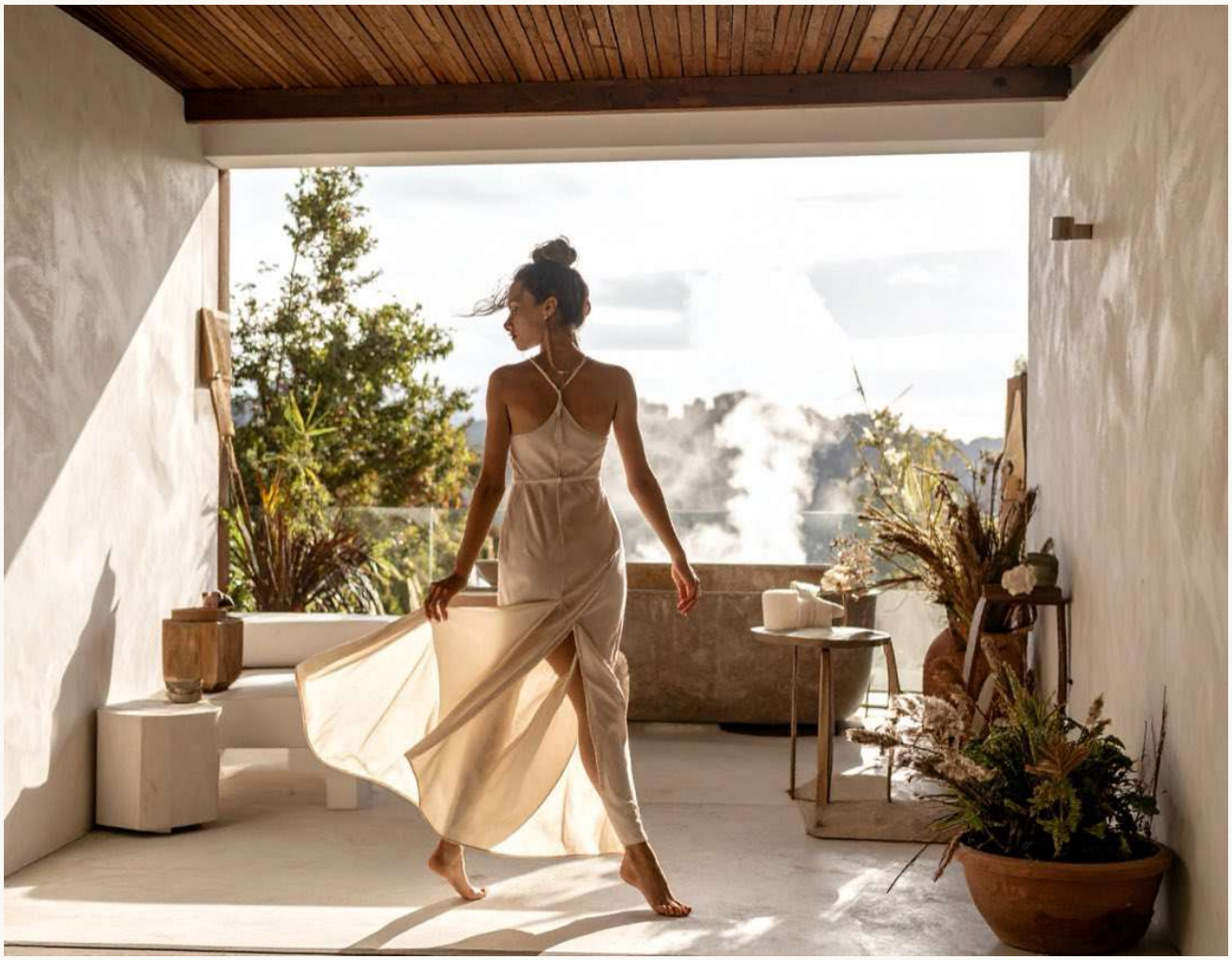
Their answer was that something had been lost in the delayering that nobody had measured. In their research, the abstract says, middle managers played a role in each element of how an organisation learns: interpreting the world, uncovering new market opportunities, focusing existing resources and accumulating new ones. And they "uncovered a strong relationship between the roles and organizational performance." Their wider body of work describes four strategic roles for the middle, two looking upward and two looking downward: championing alternatives and synthesising information for the people above, facilitating adaptability and implementing deliberate strategy for the people below. The names are from their books and are given here from memory. The shape is the point: half of what they saw the middle doing was carrying knowledge up.

It is worth dwelling on what that means for the claims manager, because the delayering argument assumed the opposite. A message passed down a hierarchy does lose detail at each layer; that much of the relay picture is true, and a firm that uses its middle only as a relay is right to ask whether it needs so many of them. What Floyd and Wooldridge saw was that the same people, used differently, were the ones who noticed when the plan from above did not fit the market below, and who argued for the alternative before anyone senior had seen the need. A firm that removed them saved their salaries and lost that noticing, and the loss appeared nowhere, because nobody had counted what the noticing was worth.

Santa Anna's canon describes the position in the same two directions, and it is honest about why the upward half so often fails. Writing about how different people in an organisation see the same process, it says:

> *Middle managers occupy the most paradoxical position: they see enough to know that the view from the top does not match the reality at the bottom, but they often lack the authority to act on this knowledge and may be incentivized to smooth the discrepancy rather than surface it.*

The last clause is the one that matters for the claims manager at ten past four. She knows, better than anyone at the offsite, what her team will say about the telephone line, and some of it is a forecast the offsite needs: which customers will not use a form, which claims cannot be described in one, what the team does on a flood weekend that no process map records. Every incentive in her position tells her to smooth it. The director wants the decision carried. Her team wants it softened. The email that sounds like the slides is the smoothest one, and it is the one most likely to be sent.



Three years inside a change

HAUTE LUMIÈRE · THE MANAGER'S WEEK · CHAPTER THREE

Three years inside a change

The most careful look at what middle managers actually do during a large change was made by Quy Huy, who spent three years inside one large firm's attempt at radical change and published his account in 2002.[19] He was looking at emotion, which the literature on strategy had mostly treated as noise, and he found that the middle managers who helped their groups adapt did two things at once that look as if they should conflict.

They committed themselves, personally and emotionally, to change projects they had chosen to champion. And they attended to the emotions of the people the change was happening to. Huy called the combination emotional balancing, and he described what happened when either half was missing. "Low emotional commitment to change led to organizational inertia, whereas high commitment to change with little attending to recipients' emotions led to chaos." Where both were present, the groups managed change and continuity at the same time: customer service held up while the new work was learned.

It is one firm, studied inductively, and its strength is in the depth of the observation rather than in any figure. But it describes the claims manager's dilemma with unusual accuracy. The enthusiastic email is commitment without attending. The careful one is attending without commitment. Neither is what Huy saw working. What he saw was a manager who meant the change and also meant to hear what it cost, and who did both in the same conversation.

It also helps to say what emotional balancing is not. It is not the manager absorbing her team's feelings so that the change can proceed without them. Huy's managers attended to their people's emotions as information about the change: where it would be resisted, what it would cost, what would have to be protected for the work to go on. The attending was part of the strategy, not a kindness offered beside it.

There is a reason the middle can do this and the top usually cannot. A director announcing a change to four hundred people can attend to their emotions only in general. A manager with fourteen people knows that one of them was answering that line the night her own house flooded, and will hear the news differently. The same knowledge sits lower down too, in the charge nurse of Chapter 2, who already leads a shift nobody has told her is hers, and the size of the group a middle manager holds decides whether she can know her people this well at all. The canon names the position as "the precise point where human development and organizational structure meet." Huy's study is a description of what happens at that point when it is used well.

The suits who mattered

If the middle carried only feelings, a firm might still decide it could do without them. The more surprising evidence is about results.

In 2012 Ethan Mollick published a study of a creative industry, the making of computer games, in which a firm's success is usually credited to its innovators, the designers and engineers whose ideas become products.[20] Using a statistical model that could separate the contribution of the firm from the contribution of the individuals who worked in it, he asked how much of the variation in firms' performance could be traced to individuals, and to which individuals. The abstract states the answer without decoration: "variation among middle managers has a particularly large impact on firm performance, much larger than that of those individuals who are assigned innovative roles." In an industry that tells its history through its creators, the people who organised the work explained more of the difference between firms than the people who invented it.

It is one industry, and the middle managers in it are project managers of a particular kind. But the finding points the same way as Floyd and Wooldridge's, from a different method and two decades later. The middle is not where the signal degrades. It is, often, where the work is made to happen.

How people arrive in the middle helps explain why so many organisations underuse them. In 2019 Alan Benson, Danielle Li and Kelly Shue studied the promotion of sales workers to manager at 131 firms, and found evidence consistent with the Peter Principle: firms tended to promote the best salespeople, "at the expense of other observable characteristics that better predict managerial performance."[21] The best seller was not, on average, the best manager, and the costs of the mismatch were high. The claims manager was promoted because she was the best claims handler on the floor. Nobody, at the time, asked whether she was good at carrying things up.

Speaking in two registers

There is a cost to the middle that the people above it rarely see, and a theory paper from 2017 gives it a name. Eric Anicich and Jacob Hirsh, reviewing decades of research on power, noticed that it had mostly compared people with power to people without it, and had neglected the experience of having both.[22] They proposed that people in positions of middle power switch frequently between two patterns of behaviour, one for the people above and one for the people below, which they called vertical code-switching, and that frequent switching, under certain conditions, produces role conflict and a tendency to hold back. It is a set of propositions, not a finding, and it should be read as one. But anyone who has sat in a glass room between an offsite and a team meeting will recognise the description.

The theory has a practical consequence that is easy to miss. If the strain of the middle comes partly from switching between two registers, then some of it can be relieved not by asking the manager to be braver, but by giving her a third register that both audiences recognise: a written form, used every time, in which she says the same thing upward that she has said downward. A habit carries less risk than a confession, and it is heard differently.

At the offsite the claims manager spoke in one register: she asked sensible questions about the timeline and agreed with the figures. At half past four she will speak in another. And between the two, in the glass room, she is doing the work that neither audience sees, deciding what she can say to each without betraying the other. The canon describes the structure that produces this in a sentence about one organisation's difficulties, and it is general enough to be true of many: "the power structure that concentrated decision-making authority in the C-suite while distributing accountability to middle management." She will be accountable for how her team takes the news. She had no part in the decision.

The Cairn, another of the house's books, reads [the leaders who are the best listeners in the building and the last to say how they are](https://hautelumiere.life/editions/rsd-rsd-and-self-confidence/page/), and the middle is where that pattern is most often learned. A manager who spends her week translating in both directions, and is heard in neither, learns to keep her own view to herself. When that happens across a whole layer of an organisation, the canon's book on how organisations move through change predicts what

follows, in a phrase that should worry any director planning a change: the discovery that "middle management has been quietly undermining the transformation because no one asked them what they thought."



Carrying it up

HAUTE LUMIÈRE · THE MANAGER'S WEEK · CHAPTER THREE

Carrying it up

Picture the claims manager the following Thursday, having decided to do one thing differently. She sent none of the three drafts. She told her team in person, at half past four, in her own words: what was decided, why, what she thought of it, and what she did not yet know. The same exercise in the canon that asks a leader to imagine the middle asks her first to imagine the front line, and one of its questions is close to the one the claims manager had chosen: "What do you know that never makes it into reports?" Then she asked them a question she had written on a card, so that she would ask it the same way every time: *What do you know about this that the people who decided it might not?*

The answers took forty minutes and filled two pages. Some were grief, and she let them be grief. Some were preferences. And some were forecasts of exactly the kind the offsite needed: that a good share of their callers, in the team's own experience, were elderly policyholders who had never used the online account; that the form had no place for a claim involving two properties; that on a flood weekend the team triaged calls by the sound of the caller's voice, which no form can hear.

The next morning she did the thing most middle managers do not do. She wrote to her director, on one page, with three headings: what the team understood and accepted; what it would cost them, said plainly; and what they knew that the decision might not have accounted for, with the two pages attached. She sent it within a week of the offsite, while the design of the change was still open, and she asked for one thing only, a reply.

The order of what she did matters more than the note. She carried the decision down before she carried anything up, so the team heard it from her and not from the intranet. She separated the grief from the forecasts, and carried only the forecasts as evidence, so that her director read them as information and not as resistance. She did it fast, because a forecast that arrives after a design is settled is a complaint. And she made the note a habit rather than an event: one page upward for every significant decision carried down, so that the director learned to expect it and to read it.

Chapter 7 carries the note upward as a working page, with its three headings and the question card, and the section below takes up the points at which it goes wrong. Its commonest failures are predictable. A manager who carries only the grief up is heard as defending her team. A manager who carries nothing up, because the decision is made, teaches her team that their knowledge stops at her door, which is the meeting after the meeting moved one floor down, the pattern *Where the Flow Stops* found in the corridor outside every boardroom. And a director who receives the note and does not reply has taught the manager not to send the second one.

It is worth looking at the note from the director's side, because the practice depends on her as much as on the manager. The director who announced the closing of the line did so on the strength of figures that were real: call volumes falling, the cost of each call, the share of customers already using the online account for other things. What she did not have, and could not have had from where she sat, was the floor's knowledge of which calls the figures described badly. She had asked, at the offsite, whether anyone had concerns, and nobody had, because the people with the concerns were fourteen miles away answering the telephone. The note is how that knowledge reaches her while the design is still open. A director who reads three such notes in a quarter, from three managers, has a better map of her own change than any survey could give her, and it cost each manager an hour.

The note also changes what the middle manager is for. A manager who only carries decisions down is the relay the delayering decade thought it could remove. A manager who carries forecasts up is the only person in the organisation who can tell the people at the top what their decision will meet, in time to change it.

The gain is the cost of the problems the forecasts prevented: the claims that would have failed in the form, the complaints that would have followed, the weekend of floods handled badly. It can be counted in records an insurer already keeps. And it depends on something that has nothing to do with the manager's skill, which is whether the questions that belong to her team are left with them, the subject of Chapter 4, so that she has the hours to listen.

Writing the note upward, in practice

The article this chapter began as ended with an email read aloud. The book can go further, into the finer points a middle manager meets when she makes the note upward a habit, and the first of them is the conversation that comes before it.

The note is only as good as what the team says, and what the team says depends on how the decision reaches them. The order is fixed. The decision is carried down first, in person, by the manager, in her own words: what was decided, why, what she thinks of it, and what she does not yet know. Saying what she thinks is not disloyalty to the people above her, provided she says it as her view and not as a campaign. Saying what she does not know is the most useful sentence of the four, because it tells the team that the decision is not finished and that what they know can still reach it.

The second point is the question. The claims manager wrote hers on a card so that she would ask it the same way each time, and the habit is worth keeping. *What do you know about this that the people who decided it might not?* is a question that assumes there is something to find, cannot be answered with silence, and asks for knowledge rather than opinion. It is different from *any concerns?*, which invites the room to reassure her, and from *how do you feel about it?*, which is a fair question for another moment and produces a different kind of answer.

The third is sorting what comes back. A team hearing a decision that changes its work will produce three kinds of sentence, and they are the same three that the meeting after the meeting produces in *Where the Flow Stops*: forecasts of what will happen, preferences for what the speaker would have done instead, and grievances, which are usually a forecast with a history attached. The manager hears all three, and honours all three in the room. She carries only the forecasts upward as evidence, together with a plain account of what the change will cost the team. Grief carried upward reads as resistance; a forecast carried upward reads as information, and the director can use it.

The fourth is the form. One page, three headings, the same each time: what the team understood and accepts; what it will cost them, said plainly; and what they know that the decision may not have accounted for, with enough detail that a designer could act on it. It goes within a week, while the design of the change is still open, and it asks for one thing only, a reply. A note that asks for a reversal will be read as an appeal. A note that asks for a reply will be read.

The fifth is the director's side, which the manager cannot control and should still prepare for. Some directors will not reply. The note should go anyway, for three weeks, because a habit is how it becomes ordinary. If there is still no reply, the manager has learned something about the organisation that is worth knowing, and the next conversation, with her director, is about how the people who decide want to hear what the people who carry out know. That conversation goes better with three unanswered notes in hand than with none.

There are mistakes worth naming. Carrying a decision down by email, which removes the moment in which the team's knowledge could be heard. Carrying nothing up because the decision is made, which teaches the team that its knowledge stops at the manager's door. Carrying everything up, unsorted, which buries the forecasts in the grief and makes the manager look as if she has taken her team's side against the organisation. And writing the note in the register of the slides, which says nothing the director does not already know.

And the decision that most changes the result is whether the manager names, in the note, the people on her team who saw what the decision missed. A forecast with a name attached can be followed up. It also tells the team, when the reply comes, whose knowledge reached the people who decide, which is the strongest reason they will ever have to say what they know the next time. Chapter 6 places the note upward in the middle of a ninety-day plan, once the manager's own week and span have been read, and Chapter 7 gives the question card, the sorting and the one-page form.

Ten past four, a month later

It is ten past four on a Thursday, and the claims manager is in the same glass room with the door open. There is one email on the screen, from her director, and it is short. The form will have a section for claims involving more than one property. The telephone line will close in the summer rather than the spring, and for policyholders over a certain age it will not close at all. And would she bring two of her team to the design meeting next week, the ones who wrote the part about the flood weekend.

Her throat is fine. At half past four she reads the email aloud to the team, all of it, including the part about the two of them.

Then she asks the question on the card again, about something else.

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The Translator's Thursday

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