

Middle Management In Indoor Climbing Gyms: Strategies For Success

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Posted By: **Ashley Routson** in [CWA Blog](#)



Regardless of the industry, the company or the exact job title—middle management is a notoriously difficult and stressful job position to hold. No matter what, you are always in the middle. You are a supervisor, but also need supervision. People report to you, but you also report to people. You have some control over operations, but not all the control. Sometimes you can make decisions, other times you need permission. You have some answers, but you don't have all the answers.

Article At A Glance

- **Writer:** [Ashley Routson of Planet Rock](#). She has a specialty in technical writing and management-related topics.
- **Who Should Read:** This article is written for all middle managers in indoor climbing gyms, as well as senior managers who oversee them.
- **What Will You Learn:** The sociology of indoor climbing gyms' managing of middle managers, and strategies that have worked.
- **Tie-Ins, Resources, or Further Reading:** The [5 Employee Recognition Hacks](#) plays well with the content in this article.

Middle managers are ping-pong balls, bouncing between the role of “leader” and the role of “follower.” Being stuck in the middle means managing the demands and the complaints of those above you, and those below you. It can be frustrating, exhausting, and ultimately lead to

burnout.

Most day-to-day gym operations are controlled by middle management. And middle management isn't always just one-tier.

The bigger the indoor rock climbing gym, the more likely multiple tiers of middle management exist. The more programs and departments you have, the more tiers you will get. And if your company has multiple gym locations, oy vey. That's a lot of middle management.

As the General Manager of an indoor climbing gym, I have many roles. I am the director of operations, the instructor of instructors, and most importantly, the manager of managers.

As the manager of managers, I manage sideways as well as down. For operations reasons, I am in constant communication with my Department Heads (Head Routesetter, Facility Manager, Head Team Coach, Youth Program Manager, and Inventory Manager). And then there are the managers of the day, aka my MOD Squad.

These are the frontline managers—the managers of the desk, the managers of the instructors. Essentially, the managers that handle the daily operations of the gym.

For this article, I'm going to focus on the frontline managers (not the department heads). The actual title of these managers varies from gym to gym, but for consistency's sake, I will call them desk managers from here.

Regular Manager Meetings

This should go without saying, but you should be meeting with your entire team of desk managers.

How often? Depends on you, your team, and your company's needs. I meet with my team once a month for two hours.

What to discuss? Again, depends on you, your leadership style, and your team's needs, hopes, and dreams. My manager meetings are broken down into three parts:

1. Team building activity
2. Company news and updates
3. Manager roundtable

Who is invited? I expect and require all desk managers to be in attendance, but also send out invites to our department heads and the owner. It isn't always possible to get everyone in a room together. But when it does happen, it is magical.

Communication and transparency are two pillars of professional growth. The more managers I can get in a room, the more information we can share, and the more we can all learn and grow together.

The Manager Toolbox

Middle managers are expected to lead others and solve problems—often without the tools and resources needed to do so. My goal is to give my managers as many tools and resources as possible. Often, I create these myself—based on the unique needs and demands of my team.

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This requires active listening on my part, as well as execution, training, and regular follow-up.

The manager meetings are a perfect setting for toolbox brainstorming. I always ask my team for feedback on what is working, what isn't working, and what is missing. Together, we troubleshoot areas of concern and methods to address them.

Team Building Exercises

This is the bread and butter of my leadership style. I was a competitive athlete for 17 years and I've been in management for nearly two decades.

My arsenal of team-building activities is pretty strong. Even so, not all my activities are a slam dunk.

However, if the activity can inspire some sort of emotional response in my team—I know I've done something right. Tears and laughter are the big ones. **If we all end up laughing or crying, a goal has been accomplished.**

My choice for a team-building activity usually revolves around the greatest need of the moment. Are there morale issues? Are there motivational issues? Are there interpersonal conflicts between my managers? Do we have issues with overly inflated egos or low self-esteem?

Allow me to share some of my most successful team-building activities below.

Defining Your Leadership Style

What is your leadership style? This is a classic interview question for positions of leadership and management.

Defining your leadership style also makes for an excellent team-building exercise. It forces self-reflection and encourages communication between managers. I have developed worksheets for my managers to help them workshop their leadership style. They are then able to communicate this to the rest of the team, and we can build conversations around our similarities and differences in approach.

Do you (the reader) have an answer to this question? If you don't, I highly recommend workshopping one.

What is my leadership style?

I am the Team Captain. Unlike the coach of the team, I train and practice side-by-side with the rest of my team every day. I lead by example and work harder than anyone else.

I do not bark orders at my team, like the coach. Instead, I inspire with my actions and hard work and use words of encouragement to motivate others. I know that my team is only as strong as our weakest player, and I work very hard to make certain that everyone on my team has the education, tools, and resources they need to succeed.

Identifying Strengths & Weaknesses

Oof, this one is a doozy. I love my managers to death, but everyone has strengths, and everyone has weaknesses. At one point, it became blatantly clear that I needed to address the weaknesses of my team. To do so, (and to create a positive growth environment), I developed a team-oriented strengths and weaknesses worksheet.

I listed each desk manager (and some department heads who regularly work with the desk team) in alphabetical order. Below each name, I had two open-ended sentence lines. This is what it looked like:

Manager Name
[Name], as a manager I think you are great at [blank line].
But, I think you struggle with or could improve at [blank line].

Each desk manager was tasked with evaluating themselves first (what you think you are great at, and where you think you need improvement). Then, they had to evaluate the rest of the team in the same format. I gave the group 20-30 minutes to complete the forms. Afterward, we went around the table in alphabetical order.

The desk manager would read their self-evaluation of strengths and weaknesses to the team. And then, the rest of the team would read what they wrote about that person. And then the next person would go, rinse and repeat.

This gave the entire team a safe and professional outlet for providing each other with pertinent feedback. All feedback started with positive reinforcement and ended with constructive criticism. Once we were able to openly discuss and confront weaknesses, the door for self-improvement became wide open.

I watched in awe as my desk managers worked together to develop solutions for the weaknesses of their teammates. **We became a stronger team that day.**

Myers-Briggs Personality Test

This was by far my most successful and comprehensive team-building experience to date.

I started with the desk managers, then opened it up to the rest of the company. I was able to get 100 percent buy-in from the company. I'm talking ownership, upper management, the entire routesetting team, department heads, and all instructors, coaches, and desk managers.

I used the website 16personalities.com for this activity. The results from this site are super insightful and inspire conversation and curiosity.

Before assigning this test, I developed a chart on the wall of our yoga/party room.

I took 16 pieces of construction paper—4 blue, 4 purple, 4 green, and 4 yellow (to correspond with the colors on the website). I labeled each paper with the corresponding personality types for the color categories. As each staff member took the test, they wrote their name on a post-it note, and stuck it to the paper labeled with their personality type.

The results were fascinating! Roughly 90 percent of my employees were in the green category of personalities—the Diplomats.

The characterizing traits of this group are “N” and “F”—Intuitive and Feeling. This test proved what we already knew about our team—we wear our hearts on our sleeves, and we love to serve and help others.

Competitive Group Activities

If the group's energy is particularly low, I try to do a physical activity that gets the heart rate pumping.

I love team-based scavenger hunts because they force individuals to work together in a competitive environment. Indoor climbing gyms are a perfect space for both scavenger hunts and competitive group activities.

When developing these activities, I am always acutely aware of the skills and knowledge of my staff. I designed the competitions to include challenges for all levels so that everyone can participate equally, even if they are not the strongest climber in the group.

Paid training in the form of trivia nights has been wildly successful for me. Planet Rock has an extensive retail space (indoor climbing gear, sport climbing gear, trad gear, professional working at heights gear, etc), and gear knowledge is a requirement of the job.

Gear Trivia Night was an absolute hit. In the weeks leading up to the event, I observed my staff learning as much as they could in preparation. We nearly had a three-way tie as a result. When you make learning fun, you get results.

Bringing It Together

Leadership is one of my favorite topics to write about, but I will never claim to be an expert on

the subject. A lot of what I know about leadership comes from my own life experience, and I am far from perfect. What works for me, might not work for others. A lot of leadership is trial and error—and you have to be willing to fail to succeed.

If any gym manager wants to reach out to me directly with questions, or to share your trials and tribulations, or just brainstorm new ideas—please feel free to do so!

You can reach me at ashley@planet-rock.com!

About the Author



Ashley Routson is the General Manager of Planet Rock Climbing Gyms in Madison Heights, MI. She is a proud graduate of THE Ohio State University, where she was a member of both the varsity swimming team and varsity rowing team. Ashley came to the indoor climbing industry after nearly two decades of working in the restaurant and craft beer industries. She is also the author of The Beer Wench's Guide to Beer--a comprehensive book detailing all things craft beer. When she isn't pulling on plastic rocks in the gym, Ashley loves moderate trad and sport climbing in the great

outdoors.

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