

Lonely managers left in the middle of nowhere, new study reveals

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Despite what we hear about life being lonely at the top, the loneliest place of all may be middle management, according to a new study by the University of Western Sydney.

Middle managers from across Australia's private sector - in areas which included advertising, insurance, construction, hospitality, aged care, financial services, IT and education - were interviewed to uncover how daily work pressures impacted on their professional as well as private lives.

Study author, Dr Melissa Parris, a UWS PhD graduate, says there's been very little research until now that has looked into how increasing workplace demands affect a middle manager's personal life.

"The study reveals the day-to-day work experiences of middle managers are leaving them feeling lonely, frustrated and isolated from friends," Dr Parris says.

"Long hours and stress are ultimately taking a toll on middle managers' relationships with their partners, family and friends, but they often keep it to themselves and put on a brave face to the world.

"In organisations today, being in the middle can mean dealing with an increasing workload from senior management, as well as being delegated more responsibility for human resource issues. However, the particular demands of the middle management role are rarely talked about."

Over a six-month period, Dr Parris undertook in-depth interviews and corresponded with middle managers to collect information about their interactions with other managers, staff and colleagues. Beyond the workplace, the study also focused on their relationships not only with family, but with friends.

"The majority of management studies concentrate on the effect workplace demands have on the individual and their family, but very few look at friendships. One of my key findings is that many middle managers have difficulty maintaining and forming friendships outside work," Dr Parris explains.

"The participants expressed both anger and frustration at how little time and attention they could pay to their friendships as a result of their middle management roles.

"This decreasing time for friendships means they have fewer and smaller social networks. With many participants recognising the importance of such support for their wellbeing, this negative impact often left them feeling more saddened and lonely."

Dr Parris also looked into the difficult distinction between friendliness and friendships in the workplace.

"A lot of middle managers referred to staff as friends one minute and then in the next breath, referred to them as staff again. This lack of distinction can create a number of people management issues."

The high level of people management required of a middle manager, and the time it required of them, was met with great surprise by many of the new middle managers interviewed.

"People management is a key skill that middle managers need, but often

it is given little training focus," Dr Parris says.

"In particular, the interactions with staff were not as neat and rational as new middle managers had expected them to be.

"Greater training in people management will benefit employees, as well as helping middle managers improve their work and private lives."

Dr Parris believes organisations need to listen to the distinct voices of middle managers.

"By listening to their middle managers, organisations will gain a different perspective and a new understanding of the key issues of communication, individual performance and managerial accountability," she says.

"The unique experiences of middle managers, compared to senior managers, should also be taken into account by management researchers as well as organisations.

"Giving attention to these experiences may reduce the deep feelings of loneliness and frustration among future middle managers."

Source: University of Western Sydney

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