Gen. Masiello and the "Frozen Middle": how to thaw the Army Center

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When General Masiello speaks of **"frozen middle, the frozen middle part… those who don't want to change because they are comfortable in their comfort zone and want to enjoy positional rents"**, he is not just provoking his world. He is naming something that exists in almost all **organizations**: companies, public administration, healthcare, schools, the third sector.

His strongest point is when he acknowledges that these words have made him unpopular with the **intermediate hierarchy**, "colonels and brigade generals," that is, the level that should bring the ideas and energies of the **young** to the top but often blocks them instead. In managerial language, this level is the **middle management**, the famous **frozen middle**: the layer of people between those who decide the **strategy** and those who work on the **front line**.

They are the ones who receive orders from above and translate them into **daily practices**, **procedures**, **changes in habits**. When something gets stuck in the middle, the entire machine

slows down: decisions remain on paper, **reforms** get bogged down, **digital transformation** becomes a slogan, and **innovation** is reduced to a few showcase projects that don't really change the way of working. It is almost never conscious **sabotage**; rather, it is a progressive **freezing**, the result of years in which **culture**, **structure**, and **personal psychology** add up and crystallize.

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Why middle management freezes

On one side, there are pressures from the **top**: change quickly, achieve new **objectives**, reduce **costs**, digitalize, be more **agile**. On the other, there are the concrete difficulties of the **teams**, the daily problems, the reassuring **“it has always been done this way”**. In between, middle managers feel the **responsibility** for the result, often without having sufficient **tools**, **time**, and **clarity**.

Resistance often arises from a **lack of meaning**, rather than instructions. Circulars, slides, and documents are never lacking; what is missing is a credible answer to the question **“why”**. Why is this **transformation** indispensable? What happens if we don't do it? What impact will it have on me and my **role**? If the change appears as yet another **managerial fad** or the whim of those at the top, it becomes natural to view it with **skepticism** and proceed at the **bare minimum**.

There is also an issue of **involvement**: many middle managers do not participate in the **design** of changes, they are informed downstream, when everything has already been decided. They

find themselves having to defend **choices** they did not contribute to and that often do not take into account **real constraints**. In these conditions, it is difficult to feel “owners” of the change; a **passive adaptation** is more likely, punctuated by small silent **slowdowns**.

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Incentive systems also play their part. If **careers** reward those who don't cause problems, who don't make mistakes, who keep the **status quo** in balance, the implicit message is clear: **don't take risks**. Change always involves margins of **error**, **experimentation**, **taking responsibility**; if the organization continues to celebrate **absolute caution**, freezing becomes rational.

The more human dimension, that of **fear**, should not be overlooked. Every transformation questions **identities** and **skills** built over years of work. A new way of working, the introduction of **technologies**, the revision of **processes** and **roles** can be perceived as a threat: what if I am no longer up to it? What if my role shrinks? What if the young can do better than me? When these fears are not recognized, they turn into **underground resistances**.

Finally, there is a very concrete factor: **overload**. Middle management is often crushed between goals to achieve, **bureaucratic requirements**, **people management**, **conflicts**, and continuous **emergencies**. To all this is added change, which requires **time**, **mental energy**, and the ability to think **medium to long term**. Without freeing up space, the transformation project is experienced as an unmanageable “extra” and therefore **postponed**, **diluted**, **watered down**.

The paradox is that without this layer, no change really holds: middle management is the **hinge** between the top's **vision** and the base's **energy**. If the hinge gets stuck, the **organizational fabric** tears.

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How to thaw the center: shared responsibility

So how do you **“thaw”** this frozen center General Masiello talks about? The first step is to change the approach to **communication**. It's not enough to announce that “project X is starting”: you need to build a clear and honest **narrative** that explains why change is necessary right now, what **real problems** it solves, what **risks** are involved in not doing it. This narrative must be grounded in the reality of the individual levels: what concretely changes for **middle managers**, what **opportunities** open up for them, what **tools** they will have at their disposal.

Next comes **true involvement**. Involving middle management doesn't mean asking “do you have questions?” about decisions already made, but having them participate in the **design** phase: gathering **ideas**, **constraints**, **scenarios**; using their **operational knowledge** to make plans more realistic; sharing **drafts** instead of presenting closed packages. Those who help build a decision are much more likely to **defend** it and make it work.

Then a real alignment between **strategic objectives** and **evaluation** systems is needed. If change is truly a priority, it must be included in the **KPI**, **bonuses**, and **promotion** criteria. We need to reward those who try **new paths**, who share **mistakes** as learning opportunities, who

grow their team on **future skills**. The message to send is that **blind caution** is no longer the safest option, but the one that exposes the organization the most.

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To support all this, serious investment in the **updating** of middle managers is needed. **Transformative leadership**, **change management**, **digital skills**, management of **hybrid** and **multigenerational** teams are not optional, but the minimum **toolbox** for those in the middle. **Targeted** and **continuous** training is also a message of **trust**: “we rely on you to build the future.”

An important part of the work is freeing up **time** and **energy**. Reducing **unnecessary requirements**, automating **routine** where possible, creating **protected spaces** to work on change projects without being sucked into the **daily urgency** is essential: we cannot expect **innovation** from those who live permanently in apnea.

All this finally requires strong **consistency** from the top. The leadership must be the first to change **behaviors**, **tools**, **leadership style**. Middle managers observe: if they see a gap between what is proclaimed and what is done, the freezing stiffens; if instead they see leaders who **experiment**, expose themselves, **defend** those who try and take responsibility for the inevitable mishaps, the message becomes **powerful**.

The **generational** theme can also be transformed from conflict to **alliance**. Bringing **young talents** and **experienced managers** to work together, creating **reverse mentoring** paths where the younger ones bring digital skills and a new perspective while the older ones offer

experience and **depth**, building spaces for **mutual listening**: these are concrete ways to dissolve the opposition and transform it into **common strength**.

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The words of General Masiello have the merit of tearing the veil on a **taboo**: often, what blocks the future is not an external enemy, but that **“frozen middle”** that guards positions and habits. The next step is for everyone to take a share of **responsibility**: the leaders, in creating the right **conditions** and **incentives**; the middle managers, in deciding whether to be content with **managing the present** or becoming **builders of the future**; the young, in transforming their ideas into **concrete proposals** and seeking **allies** instead of enemies.

Thawing the **frozen middle** is neither easy nor quick, but it is probably the only way to prevent our organizations from remaining prisoners of their own **positional rents**. And perhaps it is precisely from **strong voices** like that of General Masiello that the movement can start, which puts back into circulation **energy**, **responsibility**, and **vision**.

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