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## DRIVEN BY PURPOSE, POWERED BY STORIES



THE POWER OF PURPOSE  
ZOË ARDEN



# The vanishing middle

**I**n one of my recent interactions with business professionals on an informal, cross-disciplinary forum M.A.D.D. (Marketing Academy for Discussion and Debate), where practitioners from marketing, media, advertising, research, and design engage in candid, idea-driven conversations—the founder, a college-time friend, posed a deceptively simple question: “If AI can analyse, recommend, and even decide—where do professionals like us truly add value?”

The room fell silent—not for lack of answers, but because the question seemed to resonate far beyond the room itself.

We are, perhaps quietly, entering an era where AI is not merely augmenting human capability, it is beginning to redefine the very architecture of organisations. And in that process, one layer is feeling the heat more than most: the middle layer of management.

For decades, this ‘middle’ has been the connective tissue of organisations, that is translating strategy into execution, aligning teams, monitoring performance, and ensuring continuity. It has been both a stabiliser and an enabler.

But AI is now beginning to assume many

of these very functions. From data-driven decision support to workflow optimisation, from performance analytics to predictive insights, AI systems are increasingly capable of doing what middle management was traditionally entrusted with. The implications, as I see it, are not merely technological; they are deeply structural.

Contrary to the popular perception, the question, therefore, is not whether the middle will disappear entirely—it is whether it will remain relevant in its current form.

## **From control to contextip**

One of the most significant shifts I have observed in the industry today is the movement from control-driven management to context-driven leadership. In the past, value was often derived from access to information, oversight, and the ability to ‘Interpret’, ‘Integrate’, and ‘Implement’. Today, information is democratised, systems are integrated, and coordination is increasingly automated.

What cannot be automated, however is, tolerance and judgment in ambiguity, ethical decision-making, and the ability to inspire collective purpose. This is where



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leadership at the mid-level must evolve.

The ‘middle’ of the future cannot merely be a conduit of instructions. It must become a creator of context—someone who helps teams navigate uncertainty, interpret complexity, and align with a larger purpose beyond immediate tasks.

### **The risk of hollowing out**

There is a growing risk that organisations, in their pursuit of efficiency or cutting costs, may unintentionally hollow out the very layer that nurtures leadership pipelines.

Middle management has traditionally been the space where individual professionals:

- Lead teams towards measurable outcomes
- Make decisions with limited information
- Balance competing priorities

If this layer is compressed without

being reimagined, we may face a paradox: highly efficient organisations with fragile leadership depth. This is not a distant concern! It is already beginning to surface in subtle ways.

### **A personal reflection**

In my own journey across scientific and institutional systems, one pattern has become increasingly evident: Technology often advances faster than the systems and the people within them—are prepared to absorb it.

Following the Global AI Summit in February 2026, I had reflected in a recent article in ‘The ET-Education’ vertical that while much of the conversation focuses on capability, far less attention is paid to preparedness—of individuals, institutions, and leadership frameworks.

What I have now come to realise is that adaptation cannot be limited to tools. It must

extend to mind-sets, roles, and the very philosophy of leadership.

**In my own experience across national organisations, I have seen that even the most robust systems deliver outcomes only when individuals feel enabled, trusted, and aligned to a larger purpose.**

### Reimagining the middle

The way forward is not to resist this shift, but to redefine the role of the middle.

This redefinition may include:

- Moving from task supervision to talent development
- From process enforcement to problem framing
- From performance

monitoring to purpose alignment

In essence, the middle must transition from being a manager of work to a multiplier of people. I have seen this firsthand during my years in the Indian Air Force, where success was never defined merely by meeting targets, but by enabling teams to perform with precision and reliability. This was often in environments where something as critical as flight safety depended on collective ownership rather than individual effort.

In this evolving context, I see the ‘middle’ as the organisation’s most critical AAA—an Appreciator, Absorber and Adapter—not merely of tasks, but of change itself: appreciating its implications, absorbing its complexity, and adapting it into meaningful action. It should be often acting as the bridge between intent and execution.

### The new leadership imperative

As AI continues to reshape the contours of work, leadership will be judged not by how efficiently processes are managed, but by how effectively human potential is enabled.



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In my own experience across national organisations, I have seen that even the most robust systems deliver outcomes only when individuals feel enabled, trusted, and aligned to a larger purpose.

Organisations that recognise this early, I believe, will not just adapt—they will lead the transition. Because in the age of intelligent systems, the true differentiator will not be intelligence alone, but the ability to humanise it.

### A closing reflection

The middle is not vanishing. It is, in many ways, being invited to evolve.

What is disappearing is not the layer itself, but the comfort of its old identity.

A more demanding role is emerging—one that must make sense of change, enable people through it, and hold together the human fabric of organisations in an increasingly complex and competitive world.

The future, therefore, may not belong to those who manage the middle in this AI-driven order—but to those who can meaningfully redefine it. In that redefinition lies the true test of leadership. **IM**



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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