

The Missing Middle

How a manufacturing leadership team strengthened ownership and execution

SECTOR

Automotive components manufacturing

ORGANISATION

Mid-sized Indian manufacturer supplying leading automotive companies

PARTICIPANTS

Twelve senior leaders from production, quality, procurement, supply chain, sales, finance and human resources

BUSINESS PRIORITY

Faster execution during a period of growth

CARDS USED

The Architect, The Accomplice, The Pawn and The Martyr

OUTCOME

The team identified how its working patterns encouraged people to wait, seek approval and hand decisions upwards

01 Business context

The company had secured two new customers and approved the expansion of a production line. Growth was placing greater pressure on execution.

Recruitment for the expanded line was behind schedule. A supplier appointment had returned to the leadership team three times. Production and quality had agreed on a process change, then reopened the decision ten days later.

Responsibilities were assigned and decisions were recorded. Progress still depended heavily on reminders, reviews and intervention from senior leaders.

The managing director believed that middle managers needed to take greater ownership. His senior team frequently reviewed their decisions, resolved delays and completed work that had lost momentum. The session examined what happened between agreement and execution.

02 How Mirror Deck was used

The cards were placed face up across a large table. Each leader selected one that reflected the role they tended to take when work slowed.

After individual reflection, the cards were placed around a sheet carrying one question:

Why does clear work keep returning to the leadership team?

The group considered four further questions:

- Who needs this role?
- Who rewards it?
- What does it protect?
- What might happen if it moved?

The questions directed attention towards the relationship between roles and the way colleagues expected or rewarded particular behaviour.

03 The Architect

The head of operations selected **The Architect**.

He was known for creating order. When a problem emerged, he clarified the process, checked the detail and built a structure around the work. His involvement had supported the company through earlier periods of rapid growth.

One question on the card held his attention:

“Is your design built for the tide or the stone?”

He connected the question with the production-line expansion. The approval structure he had created was intended to support managers during the early stages of the project. It had gradually become the standard way of working.

Three managers were waiting for him to approve decisions within their responsibilities. He continued to ask them for greater ownership while remaining the final checkpoint.

“I have built a system that keeps bringing the work back to me,” he said.

The arrangement gave managers reassurance and helped the operations head protect quality. It also slowed decisions and reduced the managers' opportunity to develop judgement.

04 The Accomplice

The supply-chain leader selected **The Accomplice**.

She saw herself as someone who kept work moving, especially when deadlines were tight. She regularly followed up with colleagues, contacted suppliers herself and filled gaps before they affected production.

The question she chose was:

“What are you helping to continue by not naming it?”

She described a recent supplier decision. When a colleague missed two agreed dates, she completed part of his work and prepared the information required by the leadership team. The deadline was protected, while the missed commitment remained unaddressed.

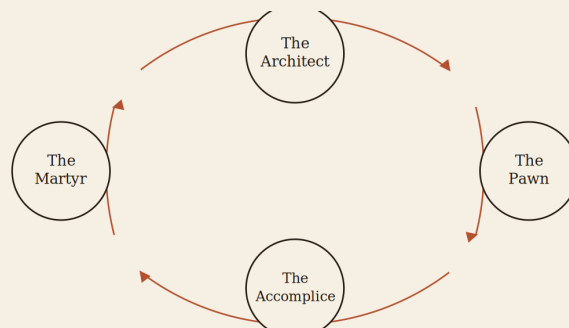
“We are good at starting the work and good at recovering it,” she said. “We pay less attention to the middle.”

The group began calling this period **the missing middle**: the space between a clear agreement and the point at which a senior leader stepped in.

05 Mapping the wider pattern

Two more cards were added to the map.

The Pawn represented managers who experienced limited room to act and learnt to send difficult decisions upwards. **The Martyr** represented leaders who carried unfinished work, protected the deadline and later felt burdened by the amount they had taken on.



The four cards described a repeating arrangement.

The Architect created a structure to protect quality. The Pawn waited within that structure. The Accomplice worked around missed commitments. The Martyr absorbed the remaining pressure.

Each role served a purpose. Together, they produced slower decisions, dependence on senior leaders and growing frustration across levels.

06 Actions agreed

The team selected three changes to test over the following month.

- 1 The operations head identified three decisions that managers would complete within their existing authority. He would remain available for consultation while leaving approval with them.
- 2 The supply-chain leader agreed to raise delays directly with the person responsible before stepping in to protect the deadline.
- 3 The leadership team also added a fifteen-minute review to its weekly meeting. The review would identify where work had slowed and which roles had appeared around it.

07 What the session achieved

The session gave the team a clearer account of its execution problem. Ownership was shaped by the behaviour of managers and by the structures, responses and expectations created by senior leaders.

Mirror Deck provided a shared language for discussing these patterns. The cards separated the role from the person, allowing participants to examine the arrangement and choose where to change it.

The team left with a practical question for future decisions:

“Are we building ownership, or are we building another route back to ourselves?”