

The RAAF's frozen middle

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It is a relatively common trend that solving an organisational strategic issue reveals another. With the implementation of digital technology, came the resistance to change and implementing change agents brought about the awareness of having a safe-to-fail culture. As of late, the awareness is again on middle management with the term "Frozen Middle." To the short sighted eye, each solution seems to produce another strategic issue to solve. However, these problems have always been present and organisations, such as the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), are simply peeling back the layers of issues to reveal them, like an onion one layer at a time. The "Frozen Middle" is a term used to stereotype the middle management of organisations today (Spreitzer & Quinn, 1996). Typically this is referring to middle managers that are slowing organisational progression due to a lack of motivation or a reluctance to take risks. In this paper, I will break down three potential factors as to why they have developed the stereotype and a possible method to treat the issue.

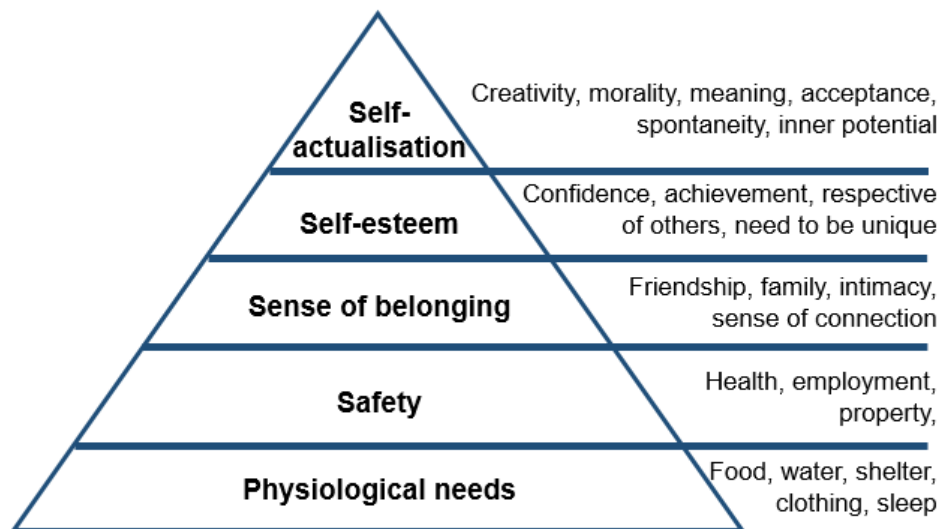


Figure 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1954).

To understand these factors, it is important to have a basic understanding of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1954) as shown in **Figure 1**. To summarise a multitude of interesting research on this topic (Clay, 1977; Hopper, 2020), a notion that individuals have levels of needs with the lower needs (from the base of the pyramid) being required to be met before meeting higher needs (to the apex) become meaningful. However, once one has met the need, it decays requiring for the need to be met again. For example, if you eat, you fill the physiological need for food, but you will get hungry again. One could argue that the current RAAF workforce is designed in a way that fails to meet several needs of the middle managers. This includes the way responsibility is issued and rewarded, the social division between roles

may be detrimental to middle management's self-esteem, sense of belonging and psychological safety. Therefore, the symptoms of the frozen middle may be symptoms of their needs not being met.

Perhaps the question of how RAAF's middle managers value themselves (or **self-esteem**) can be considered the first factor that gives rise to the RAAF's frozen middle. The RAAF workforce has shifted heavily to a skills and information based economy, which has shifted the way we work. As more specialised skills are required for tasks chains of command change to accommodate. In the RAAF, there is a clear official chain of command that travels up from a Junior Aviator to Corporal (CPL), to Sergeant (SGT), to Flight Sergeant (FSGT) to the Warrant Officer (WOFF) then on to the Officer-in-Command (OIC). However, there is a less official sublevel chain of command that aligns more closely to skills. To hasten information flow, the Junior Aviator may be reporting on that specific task, directly to the FSGT, WOFF and even a Commissioned Officer. This speeds up that specific task but can leave the middle management completely out of the loop, leaving them wondering what their job has become. One could argue this strips away the middle managers sense of status and position and damages their self-esteem, an upper need within Maslow's hierarchy, as seen in Figure 1.

The second factor that gives rise to RAAF's frozen middle is the lack of **sense of belonging** to a particular group in the chain of command. A middle manager does not do the hands-on job nor are they the executive who makes the final decision. They are placed in the middle of both worlds, which is what gave rise to the term 'middle management'. One could argue that such position puts them in a strange and challenging situation where they do not belong to either group. Such position leads them to being treated like workers from the upper managers and at the same time treated like managers from the workers. This inconsistency may disrupt their sense of belonging, being an outsider to either ends of the workforce, which is a key social need within Maslow's hierarchy, as seen in **Figure 1**.

The third and last factor that gives rise to the RAAF's frozen middle is psychological **safety**, which is the belief that one won't be punished or humiliated for speaking up one's own ideas. As middle managers, they are often required to be the change agents for strategies they may not be fully convinced of themselves. The hierarchy pushes down expectations and the responsibility of the change onto the middle managers, while they simultaneously deal with the resistance to change from the lower-end of the workforce. Causing middle managers to feel the pressure from both sides of the workforce. One could then argue that the pressures from both sides could jeopardise the perceived employment and work resource safety for middle managers. This relates to psychological safety, which is a necessity that middle managers require to be satisfied as described in Maslow's hierarchy.

So how do we solve the problem of RAAF's frozen middle? Leadership, as it is, refers to the exercise of power based on the relationship between the leaders and the followers. However, unlike the use of power, transformational leadership identifies, responds to, and is inseparable to the needs and goals of followers. Transformational leadership is a style developed by Burns (1978), who designed to elevate and inspire the followers through accommodating for individual needs and converging of organisation and individual goals (Andriani, et al, 2018; Eliyana, et al, 2019). This may include adapting different ways of doing business to meet the needs safety, social and esteem needs of SGTs. Applying this style of leadership may help to address the unmet needs of RAAF's middle manager, may consequentially address the symptoms of the frozen middle.

To summarise, the RAAF's frozen middle is only a symptom of a larger issue. The analysis of this issue using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is only one approach to an organisational problem, with the suggested solution of Transformational Leadership as only one of several possible approaches. Nonetheless, a rank and position that lacks motivation is risk adverse is a liability in the RAAF's rapidly changing environment.

References

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