Centre for Inclusive Employment & Disability Employment Australia
Lunch & Learn Session | Wednesday, 22 October 2025

Leading from the Middle: Practical Approaches for Middle Managers

Speaker: James Weait | Populi Solutions

Host: Sally Karandews (DEA)

SALLY KARANDREWS: Good afternoon everyone and thank you for joining us for this week's Lunch and Learn. My name is Sally, I am the Disability Employment Policy Manager here at DEA and it is my pleasure to be here with you this afternoon. I'd like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which each of us are joining from. For me that's the land of the Darkinjung people and I pay my respects to Elders past and present and those of the future. These lunch and learn sessions are held in partnership between the Centre For Inclusive Employment and Disability Employment Australia, and aim to give you a series of practical and useful information, resources tips and tools that you can take away and implement in your own practice. Today I am joined by James Weait from Populi Solutions. After quite a career in the employment services industry both if the UK and Australia, James has started Populi Services Solutions where he combined both a passion for fitness and also an intense interest in ensuring the mental health and ongoing welfare of people that are participating in employment services. James has extensive management and leadership experience and he is here with us today to share some of that with you all. So today I will hand over to you, James and there will be plenty of times for questions at the end. So if you have any questions, feel free to pop them in the chat and we will get back to them later in the session. Thank you.

JAMES WEAIT: Thank you for the introduction, Sally and thank you to the Centre For Inclusive Employment and the Disability Employment Australia for inviting me to speak today. Welcome to the Leading From the Middle, Practical

Approaches For New Managers. If you are an experienced manager, please don't dial out, I hope we will have some new strategies for you and at the very least some that you might be grateful to be reminded of. I'd like to start with an Acknowledgment of Country. We have chosen a picture of a calm river in still water to acknowledge the Turrbal and Yugara people, the traditional owners of the land on which I am joining you from, Kurilpa. I pay my respects to Elders past and present and extend that to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today. The stretch of middle management can be all too real. Ensuring sites run like clock work and executive management teams get the information they need is a daily juggling act and we have used a comical image of an office manager reaching between senior management and frontline staff labels. It is important to look after yourself to be in the best place to lead your staff. Over the next few slides we have included practical evidence-based tips to help you create and maintain an inclusive, motivating high performance culture, and our core 6 themes today are going to be: self-care, shared purpose, empowering employees, communication, feedback and performance management.

First up self-care. For our title we have used the image of an elderly man with a towel wrapped on his head holding cucumbers over his head smiling. We want you to take this first area seriously. Self-care will help you thrive and avoid burnout. Self-care starts before you get to work. Could you wake up 15 minutes earlier than you currently do for "you" time? Have you considered having your phone "sleep" in a different room to help your day not begin by processing notifications? Could you start a new exercise habit, a jog, a swim, a walk to release endorphins, the feel-good hormone? If you are time poor in the morning, could you park that little bit further from the office to stretch your legs a little? When you are setting up your day, good practice is to write down the 3 things you want to achieve, the core three and then check in with them at the close of business. It is a great way to see how distracted and pulled you might be getting in your operational role. On this slide we have included a picture of a laptop with an outlook mailbox on it. The inbox is empty and there are two core subfolders, "action" and, "reference". I was given this simple folder tip 15 years ago and it changed my life. I became the boss of my inbox, rather than it being the boss of me. It comes from the principle that every email, either needs to be replied to, actioned or kept for reference, and it is as simple as dropping them from the inbox into those two folders. This creates a to-do list in your action folder, but you can also leave the super urgent emails in your inbox to close by the end of the day.

For self-care and at your desk, we have included an image of a woman in an office chair stretching her neck and shoulder appearing to relieve tension. It starts with ergonomics, but also we can tell our brain how to feel and what chemicals to produce by changing body posture. If you want to feel sad, act like it. You can do that by keeping your shoulders slumped and head down. If you want to feel happy, you need to do the opposite, stand tall. So thinking about that before you go in for an important meeting, or taking on perhaps a client complaint. Honestly, if you take a beat to sit up a little bit straighter right now, I bet you'd feel a bit better. For desk snacks we recommend keeping some dark chocolate in your top drawer. It contains phenylethylamine, a substance that releases the feel-good endorphins. On your lunch break, and please take your lunch break, because you owe it to your team to recharge as well, so please take that lunch break, take a trip outside. You will be releasing serotonin if you do. It controls wellbeing and happiness. Not having enough is thought to contribute to depression. A very scary statistic, says that the average person spends 93% of their time inside. At lunch you can engage in something that makes you laugh. This could be something as simple as watching 5 minutes of your favourite comedian on YouTube. It releases the happy chemicals, serotonin and endorphins into our brain. When things get stressful you can try circular breathing, in for 3, hold for 3, out for 3 to bring oxygen into the brain and help regulate the hormone cortisol. That controls your fight or flight response. This is so important because too much cortisol being released in your body can have negative long-term health affects. We have used an image of a woman with closed eyes centred. Breathing is such a great coping strategy, because we carry it with us everywhere we go. On a particularly challenging day write down frustrations, details, rants, complaints, out of your head on to paper. When you feel it is out of your head rip that up and throw it in the bin. This communicates that you are ready to move on. Take yourself from the situation and do something completely different. The Royal College of Medicine did 13 studies in 2005 and found that using expressive writing had significant benefits in objective or self-reported physical health, psychological well-being and physiological wellbeing.

Our next area is shared purpose. For the title we have used an image of 4 hands of different skin tones grasping each others wrists in a connected circle. It is important for employees to feel unified by a common purpose, where their actions are guided by organisational values. It has been proven that high performing teams know each other's skills, experience, strengths and development areas, and in launching a new contract you have a huge opportunity to create the positive culture you want to from day 1. In the spirit of this, we wanted to give you 3 different ideas for culture and purpose building team buzz sessions that you may want to run in your first few weeks of the new contract. So the saying goes, "The standard you walk past is the standard you accept." Be mindful of this as a leader, but also consider the environment you are inviting participants into. For this buzz meeting idea ask ECs to stick a note on anything in the site that doesn't meet the standards that participants and they deserve. We have included an image of a pile of yellow sticky notes with Blue Tac and crumpled paper in a bin and a crumpled paper bin, because this exercise may identify random boxes, overflowing bins, ridiculously cluttered desks, or Blue Tac on the walls, out-of-date things displayed on the wall. It is ensuring signage, reception areas, interview rooms and staff places meet universal standards, not just for compliance, but for the dignity of participants and it can be incredibly visual when everybody sees the sea of yellow notes at the end of that little 5 minute exercise. Buzz idea number 2, run a get to know you session for your teams. It could take the form of a live interview with you or perhaps each EC taking a turn. You will receive so much helpful information, including, but not limited to their past professional experience, particularly for those brand new ECs to the organisation and maybe the industry. You'll learn the industries and sectors they have had exposure to and will be able to help participants prepare for. Their personal circumstances, values, and perhaps even their why, knowing whether someone has a family or pets or loves movies can help you, not only appropriately support their commitments outside of work, but also consider any incentives or spot prizes tailored for them. Some will value time off in lieu, others might be motivated by cinema tickets. Particular EC-related passions. It might be mock interviews, workshops, cold calling, compliance, résumé writing. You'll be able to create a site of regional directories or databases of skills and strengths. Applying a similar principle if you have multiple sites dialling into your buzz meetings could they take it in turns to provide virtual tours of the office and share best practice. We have put pictures that represent an outdoor stair lift, a cork jobs board to see how sites have set their job boards up and categorised them and made them visually exciting; a group of people sitting in a meeting room to symbolise different set-ups for training; a kitchen unit for the staff kitchen and how that's set up, a female participant waiting on a reception chair again to symbolise how they have been figured and a row of chairs to represent the job area. When you are recruiting especially for recruitment, try to save time by cutting corners and simply relying on industry experience. Test candidates through role-play and second and third questions to challenge them and make sure they are the right fit for the culture you are building. Induction takes time and it is really expensive. You don't want to have to do that more often than you need to. You definitely don't want to keep deferring your job output performance by constantly recruiting new staff. As when and if staff do leave take the time to ensure you acknowledge their contribution in front of their colleagues in-person or via an all team email. If you fail to do this, the staff that are remaining will start to question how much their own effort is appreciated and valued and you may start to experience dips in motivation and performance. For the visual members of the team, how might you bring their team targets alive? We have included the image of the interior of a local stadium with ticket tape floating to the grass, because one idea might be to look up the number of participants you need to place into work over the next 12 months or life of the contract and then map that to the capacity of local venues. If you find one that's close you can galvanise the team to fill the seats and perhaps colour in a seat map in a staff kitchen as the jobs start landing.

For an empowered teams area, we have an image of a young girl dressed as a super hero in red and purple bursting through paper with a joyful expression. Here on the first empowerment slide is an image of a ship's captain scrubbing the deck of a vessel at sea wearing a white uniform and cap. We have used this image to specifically bring to life the famous saying, "If the captain of a ship starts scrubbing the deck they can't see the horizon and keep an eye on the future for the crew." The same is true for a new managers at IEA, the temptation might be to jump in and do some of those EC tasks for a number of reasons. You might feel if the EC does the activity it won't be as good or thorough from calling an employee to get an evidence for an outcome in. You may feel you are asking too much of the EC and you don't want to ask too much of the EC, or you might want to show the team how awesome you are and how useful you can be in doing that activity. The problem is that not delegating and jumping in and doing that task negatively impacts the morale of the person who should be empowered. It limits their opportunity for growth and skill development, plus it sends the message that you don't have confidence in that person's abilities. So what could empowerment look like? Fundamentally empowerment looks like letting the team learn the same journey you likely did of growth, failing. Remember, fail is the first attempt in learning and improving at tasks. Another thing you can do to empower your team is establishing a buddy system so the ECs can learn from each other. Remember the way that you were successful as an EC may not be the way that every member of your team will be successful. You are going to need to leverage the different skills in your team, and you might want to compliment somebody who is particularly good at cold calling employers with somebody who is particularly good at potentially building a rapport with local community partners. You could encourage microinnovations, they could be small local ideas that come from the team that improve access, perhaps suggestions for flexible appointment timing or sensory friendly spaces. You could establish a medium for feedback for staff and participants. You never know what you'll get and we've included a picture of a suggestion box with a yellow toaster in front of it, because a small gesture for the staff kitchen, if suggested by your staff may be the kind of thing that could get you disproportionate brownie points and have the team super happy. You've got the team empowered and tasks delegated, but what does that leave for you as a manager? What are you possibly going to do with your time? Here are some ideas for some more tasks that you could be completing that may be more appropriate to your level. You could be strategically planning for placement drives around the seasonal labour market. As the data grows on the IEA contract you'll be able to see month-to-month who you have placed in work and where you have placed them and start to pipeline for those vacancies as you go. You could observe employment consultant appointments, both the ECs that are struggling and those that are flourishing. You could visit, meet and work with provider partners and employers. You could form a local accessibility panel of clients or community representatives who provide feedback on site design, processes and communication. For our communication area we have colourful speech bubbles in different shapes arranged in a turquois background framed in the slides. As with all of these slides there is so much we could say. Keeping it high level there are two types of communication, asynchronous and synchronous. Asynchronous is on your time, it is communication when you don't expect others to be available and respond immediately to you. So this is things like text messages and emails. Then we have synchronous communication, which is when you might expect an immediate response, typically when you are on a phone call with somebody or when you are in a video meeting. So for asynchronous communication be really mindful as you are super busy of simply flicking your to-do list without context or sensitivity to the communication style of the person that's receiving your message. For the big messages, keep those messages positively framed and connected to the mission, values and purpose. Remembering this is asynchronous communication, so do allow a minimum of 24 hours before you are chasing up replies.

For synchronous communication, make sure that you have a strong purpose, that the meeting has a specific problem to discuss. We've all been in situations where we have felt like things are too meeting heavy and we might be having meetings for meetings sake, or consider everything about the meetings that you are now setting as a leader for your local business. Consider the agenda titles, be specific so people can arrive ready. For example communication strategy meeting becomes how can we better engage local IEA eligible residents on Facebook to be able to access our service? I mean, that's incredibly specific, but hopefully you get the principle. Invite the right people to your meetings. Not everybody needs to be in every meeting. Sometimes when you are considering your buzz meetings, how many of the conversations you are having on there could be quickly picked up to the side. Try and mimic face-to-face meetings and the power of that connection with your video meetings. You could open your meetings 10 minutes early, allow attendees to drop in, catch up, get connected and stay on afterwards to formally debrief. Now, you are probably an excellent critical listener by nature of the job that you do. That basically means that you can actually detect lies quite quickly. One of the most important things to master as a manager and actually in this sector, is relational listening. This is more than just active listening. Active listening is nodding and mirroring and presenting that positive language of the body. This involves genuinely trying to understand a person's point of view through open questioning. You are showing empathy and not judgment. Now, that doesn't mean that you are agreeing with the other person, it just means that you understand where they are coming from and you are asking questions to understand why they feel that way. As a leader as well, I think it is important to show vulnerability. Sharing your vulnerabilities can be essential to boosting group performance. We have an image on this slide of a woman speaking sincerely with her hands on her chest, beside a note reading, "It is okay to be human." Mirroring is such a common dynamic in groups and we pick up on the ways those around us behave and take up the same patterns as them. Admitting weaknesses and mistakes signals to the other group members that they can do the same. It is such a great way to build trust with your ECs. As a leader you don't need to have all the answers. You just need to know who to ask. It is such an important thing to take away. Otherwise you are putting yourself under far too much pressure.

Our feedback title slide has a close-up image of a hand selecting a green smiley icon on a feedback touch screen. Before any feedback meeting, gather the facts of the matter and be specific. If you were in a car and you felt like someone was driving dangerously and you wanted to alert them, you wouldn't just say, "You are driving dangerously." Because they won't know what to specifically correct. You probably need to make comment on their speed or choice of lane or something else. The same is true of your operational conversations. Bring objective facts, dates, times, stats, answers, it is important to frame things as, "I have observed", rather than, "You are." Most feedback requires a follow-up email. So a top tip actually is to write the majority of that email in advance, not to serve as a script or to prejudge the outcome of potentially a disciplinary feedback meeting, but to give your conversations structure and to save your time after the meeting. Put the meeting into your diary with some time to prepare and get into the right head space. You don't want to be late or skidding into it from something else. A university of Michigan study found that the highest performing teams received 5.6 pieces of praise to one criticism. We have an image of the ratio of 5 to 1 embossed in gold, because this is a key thing to keep in mind when you are coaching your teams. You'll need to prepare and consider lots of observations if you want to optimally motivate your staff. When you are using that 5 to 1, try and avoid, "Me", and try and use, "We" strengths. What do we mean by that? Me strengths are if someone loves doing a résumé, that's a me strength. There is less impact in praising somebody for a me strength because they are already loving it, they are already rewarding themselves with that activity. We strengths are activities that bring the team together and will form your culture. So an EC adapting an interview process or simplifying an onboarding form, buddying, running workshops, exceeding KPIs, these are the strengths you really want to lean into and try and identify in your teams and perpetuate and keep reinforcing.

For our performance slide we have an image of wooden blocks stacked as ascending bars with arrows pointing upward on a blue background representing growth. Performance comes from genuine motivation and creating an uplifting work environment that enables employees to be the best at whatever work they do. Here are four fundamental tips. Try to avoid group buzz meeting forecasts. It is unlikely you'll get the truth. People tend to be a bit nervous in front of their colleagues to say they are struggling if they are struggling. Get information early, individually in week 1 to give you time to plan and move around the various things that might be at your disposal from sales teams, or otherwise. Beware of monthly whiteboard fatigue and consider taking a picture of your staff performance in the kitchen. That acknowledges the legacy effort while you keep the team focused on the current target. It can get a bit relentless of that monthly churn of monthly hitting and all of that effort suddenly being wiped. Let under-performance be under-performance. Don't apologise for it. So when the team doesn't meet their KPI, acknowledge that performance was below expectation and speak to the plan to build from it. I have done a lot of leadership coaching over the last 8 years and time and again when a manager is struggling with their team and I observe one of their buzz meetings, they will say, "We didn't meet target last month", but all too quickly they will jump in and say, "But you tried really hard", and yes, probably the team put a lot of effort in. The problem is if you go too heavy on the appreciation of the effort that it takes, notwithstanding effort does need to be appreciated, just be very mindful that the longer you play in that space actually the more the team will forget that they under-performed last month and may not necessarily build on that for the next month. So do acknowledge that performance, do speak to the plan, and it is okay to under-perform, there is always time to bounce back. When scheduling reviews, resist the temptation to schedule under-performance first to help. Engage the high achievers first to understand what's working right now and share that good practice as far and wide as you can. My hope is that you guys are on a long leadership journey now which will be fantastic. The longer you are on that leadership journey, of course the further you are from that recent frontline experience, so tapping into those high achievers is so important and it can be so so tempting to say, that person struggled, they need me right now, I think it is important to bring a balance there and try to get some current tips for your teams. If an employment consultant is struggling, here are the core questions you may want to be asking to help frame your discussion with them. They are built around activity and empowerment. How active are their participants? When was their last attended appointment? Are they seeing these people? When was the last booked appointment? The crucial one I think is what is happening between appointments? Have they set a specific activity or are we talking about half an hour fortnightly where the participant is actually thinking of employment? Has the employment consultant looked at their pipelining, and by that I mean to say, looking at their case load, looking at the KPI they need to achieve in placement terms and thinking, right, I will double that KPI, I will apply it to my case load. Who are my most job-ready participants that fall into there and looking at those. Those are the ones that are going to be the most active over the next 4 weeks; they will be doing things in and around appointments, going to workshops while the EC looks to try to get the remainder of the case load to graduate into that core group. If an EC comes back to you and says, "I have no job ready participants on my case load", that's okay, everything is relevant. Let's look at those that are closest to work, even if none of them are looking at employment right now. It is really important an EC can categorise that. On the empowerment question it is really interesting to understand how work focus conversations with an EC are. Having worked in disability employment for many years myself, I saw time and again employment consultants occasionally drifting from work-focused conversations and almost becoming surrogate GPs. Of course it is so important to gain all of the things that we need to from participants, understand what their current barriers to employment are, what they are working with, what their circumstances are, but then ultimately catch that and then say, "Fantastic, thank you. We will work sensitively to that while we do the thing that we are specialist in doing, which is trying to help you find sustainable employment." The other question that can be really interesting and helpful to know is does the employment consultant know the participant's motivation for work? That's such a fundamental question across the entire case load to know, because if they know that, if they know that they are doing it for their kids or to save up for a holiday or to get their pride back, or whatever it might be, then that EC will know what they can actually work with with the participant, how they can coach them, the conversations they can have with them. They should know the motivation of work for every single one of their participants, even if that participant is still quite far from the labour market.

My final thought for you is that KPI stands for key performance indicators, but KPI also stands for keep people informed, keep people interested, keep people involved and keep people inspired. Our last image is of a wave lapping a sandy beach with the words, "Yes, you can" written into the sand. Thank you so much for your time. We have just stopped for questions, I think.

SALLY KARANDREWS: Thank you so much James. If anyone has any questions feel free to pop them into the chat. We have had a couple come through, so to get started. James, do you have any examples of specific lessons you've learnt through your own middle management experience that you might be willing to share with us?

JAMES WEAIT: Sally, thank you, yeah, look, I will be honest, many, many, dozens. One spring to mind that isn't necessarily covered in that deck. I had an incredibly high performer who was working on a contract for me in London, it was called pathways to work, it was a disability employment contract. She was by some distance my top performer. I am going to change her name for the purposes of this, I will call her Amber, and she was a high performer for me. I basically committed the error that I called out on this slide of not preparing for a meeting with her. There was a change in policy at the provider I was working with around people's sick leave, personal leave that they were taking, and that after 3 instances we'd just have a self-care meeting with them. I just skidded into the meeting with this individual, knew I had the support of my people and culture and HR in the meeting anyway, was coming off the back of a Centrelink call or equivalent or job centre call, and just felt it was going to be a run-of-the-mill meeting, just a check in, see what was going on and make sure she was okay. I had underestimated how proud she was, and how that personal leave record meant to her and just was not prepared for the meeting. Suddenly with something as innocuous as a personal leave meeting, it wasn't anything other than a wellness check-in, I found myself found erring and not in a position to support her appropriately and to the extent that I think for the next couple of months she was a wee bit lost, she just was not quite as brought into the operation as she had been, and that was on me. I felt awful about it. I think from then on I know that I have always - I'd always been quite a high actioned manager, lots of meetings in the day and from then on I started to build that time in before each meeting, so I made sure I was definitely prepared. It was a really valuable lesson for me.

SALLY KARANDREWS: Absolutely. Thanks for sharing that one. You touched on self-care a bit at the start of your presentation and I was wondering if you had any thoughts for doing self-care at the end of those days and the scenarios that's come up is you've had one of those days, maybe there has been a few difficult conversations with complaints or people within your team and it has just been generally a rough day but you don't want to take that home to your partner, your family, any advice for those kind of end of a big day kind of scenarios?

JAMES WEAIT: I will add an extra layer to that if it is helpful, or not, which is to say for some of you out there, if you are new to management and you are used to managing people you used to be colleagues with, you are probably thinking, I don't want to burden the team with this feeling that I have got at the moment, so it can be extra tricky. I think it is a great question. From my perspective my business is a mental health business, we operate with lots of

Allied Health professionals who have supervision. Taking the principle of that and also bringing in some of the themes around what to do now that you are a manager, I didn't mention this due to time, as I said, there is a lot of things we can get into of these themes, but one of the things now if you are new to management and have stepped into a management role with a provider, you were previously an EC is to start building a network within your provider. That may involve, perhaps it is people at your level who are operating at different regions. Perhaps it is also getting to know your corporate team. It is actually valuable time spent understanding how your people and culture team is going to support your recruitment team, actually getting to know them, understanding their pain points, knowing when you can and can't speak to them. I now feel that if you have got that network around you to share the burden of these things I think that can be so helpful in terms of self-regulating. So for example if you have got a complaint that you need to reply to, typically it will involve another arm of the business, and you may be able to lean on them for some advice, and that will help just slightly diffuse it for you. Failing that you may be able to reach out to a colleague who might have dealt with something similar as well and just get their advice, get their support, and then you owe them one for the future. Don't really just take on yourself is my most important job. Don't feel like you are doing the job. You will still be probably the one to reply to the complaint or deal with the problem, but you can talk to your colleagues about it. I think it is really important to lean into your network, it goes without saying, please check in with your own provider and their own feedback process, but ultimately leveraging the network is so, so important.

SALLY KARANDREWS: Finally, for those of us who might be here today who are stepping into a management role for the first time with this new contract about to begin in pretty much a week and a little bit, what would be the first thing that you would be doing come, first thing Monday morning on the 3rd of November? Where would you start?

JAMES WEAIT: What a great question. Look, I think before the doors have even opened I would have drafted my email to the team to say, "Welcome to IEA, it is going to be fantastic." I am a very visual character, I would have my stadium equipment. I would know something big, bold exciting for people to get behind and have that purpose threaded through the conversations I was having with people and just making sure that that was the I guess the key mantra. Clearly opening the doors and making sure the doors are open is probably the very first priority, and we all know typically that is the first thing that's checked as well by the procurers of the contract. It is really important to get the practical stuff, are the doors open, make sure we have got everybody open, got people in each site and be able to see the participants. From there, Sally, I guess I have done my thing, those are my three priorities and at the end of the day hopefully I can tick them all off and say I have done all of those. Of course, I suppose the final thing I would say is keep the to-do list as light as that as you possibly can for that day, because there will be some speed bumps, there will be some things that you are not planning for. There will be little things that pop up. So try not to have meetings that morning, try to just be clear to be able to be that anchor and that counterpoint for your team as those little things come up, we didn't order paper for the printer. There will be some little things that potentially got missed in what is an extraordinary effort of opening up one site on day 1 of one of these contracts.

SALLY KARANDREWS: Being available is always a good place to start, especially on day 1. Thank you again for your time today and for sharing all of that information with us. We will be sharing these slides after today if anyone wants to revisit any of the conversation, please feel free. Thank you again, James and thank you Liv and Hanif for making today possible. Next week we will be joined by James who will be talking about brain hacking, the science behind building trust. Please register for next week, we look forward to having you all back here again. Thanks again.

JAMES WEAIT: Thanks, Sally, thanks for having me.

(End)