

CHRIS'LL DEAL WITH IT

episode notes



EP 27 - Managing The Middle: Building Walls While The House Is On Fire

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 www.ChrisKreuter.com/CDWI

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AI Statement: All elements of this episode are products of the author, Chris Kreuter, made without any use of AI tools.

- The **Managing The Middle** series offers advice on serving as a better bridge between the divides within our organizations, societies, and lives.
- It's the kind of advice I would have benefitted from when I started managing projects and people in my twenties.
- The series is also intended as a counter to polarization and extremism, an aide to embracing the shades of gray between issues.
- In the show notes you'll find a link to Episode 9, the first in this series

EP 9 – Managing The Middle: 5 Strategies For Charlie Bucket

 <https://www.chriskreuter.com/ep-9-managing-the-middle-5-strategies-for-charlie-bucket/>

- Today I'm focusing on one of my favorite sayings:

It's hard to build walls when the house is on fire.

- It's meant to capture a specific tension: Balancing the building of meaningful, substantial things that matter (such as systems, tools or products), against the constant barrage of modern life (unplanned problems, constant interruptions, mundane tasks & demands on our time)
- As listeners of the podcast know, I like to theme my episodes around an analogy, and this one is no different.
- I'd like you to consider the project, goal, or process that looms largest in your life. The one that, when completed, will truly make a difference. Let's consider this the house you're trying to build.
- Building this house is going to take a large effort.
 - It may involve a team of people with a specific deadline
 - It may be a solo project that will take years
 - Or you may be facing a more daunting task of a larger development, such as building a company from the ground up.
- Regardless of the size of the project, you can improve your chance of success by paying attention to a few key concepts:
 1. Environment
 2. Objectives
 3. Materials
 4. Foundation
 5. Pace

1. Environment

- You'll rarely have perfect environmental conditions to do your best work.
 - That's worth repeating: Understand there's always going to be imperfections you need to content with.

- Get comfortable with being uncomfortable.
- Let's say you find yourself in the middle of a half-built house.
 - You have multiple crews with different responsibilities to manage: Roofers, electricians, plumbers, masons, etc...
 - Each requires specific skills, materials, and methods to get their jobs done effectively
 - There's going to be conflicts, frictions between these groups. All will demand various parts of your attention. Dozens of small fires needing to be put out (hopefully figuratively and not literally)
- Whether it's a home or a company, you need to balance:
 - The end goal (the completed home, product, company mission)
 - The departmental deliverables (the sub-systems, department processes, project elements)
 - And individual desires (the customer, the employees, and the communities impacted by your operations/products).
- So how will you maintain your balance amongst the uncertainty of your environment?
 - Will you allow yourself to be pulled every which way by the demands of others?
 - Can you identify a 'north star' to help you stay oriented on the critical elements of success?
 - How much mitigation are you going to need to establish to ensure the environmental conditions are managed?
- A few mitigation strategies that can help contain your environment:
 - Weekly check-ins, both personal & for your team
 - "Office Hours" - Isolating specific blocks of time for those relying on you to present problems & issues needing your attention
 - Assign trusted people on your team or in your network to assist in keeping you accountable to your goals

- Having an easy-to-use note-taking and/or task management system: Ease the burden your brain has to remember everything on your plate
- Time-block planning: Breaking your goals into time-bound elements (yearly, quarterly, monthly, weekly, daily, and even hourly)

The Online Home of the Deep Life Movement

TDL is the online home of the Deep Life Movement, which argues for the importance of focus in a world increasingly deluged by distraction. "The deep life" is a term coined by

 <https://www.thedeepife.com/>



- Communicating your requirements & methods to the team: How can they work to help you maintain a positive environment within which you'll do your best work?
- It's important to note that you don't need to be the boss (the foreman, project manager, CEO, whatever).
 - These environmental controls are just as important for those on the lower rungs of an organization as they are at the top.
 - While there is a need to cater more to those with higher levels of responsibility, it's just as helpful to the overall project to establish your own environmental controls to do the best work within your assigned scope of work.
 - Remember that the people at the top of the hierarchy can't possibly control every variable. Take pride in ensuring success within your domain, and speak up when your needs aren't being met.
 - The mason's responsible for ensuring the proper water mixture in their mortar, and controlling the environmental conditions when they mix. The project manager's focus is on the wall being built - **but it's imperative that both parties have trust and understanding, and a method of effective communication, when something out of their mutual control goes wrong.**

2. Objectives

- Keep objectives top of mind - spending a few minutes at the start of each day contemplating:

- The current target or milestone
- What is the most important thing you can do today to move closer to that target?
- Over-communicate these objectives and actions to all stakeholders as best you can
- Develop a scaffolding to support what you're building
 - A method for regularly reviewing goals & actions
 - Review the processes & tools you're using
 - Occasionally inspect the scaffolding itself, does it need to change to better support the next stage of your project?
- Allow for adaptation (both personal and for the project)
 - Not everything goes to plan: If you or your objectives are too rigid, you risk building something that could become outdated or meet the wrong expectations.
 - The longer the time scale it'll take to achieve your goal, the more likely adaptation will be needed
 - If it took you five years to renovate a house by yourself, there's a chance that building codes can change, styles can become outdated, materials can go obsolete, tools can fall out of calibration
 - There's also more risk of people turnover, which would require more effort to onboard partners to your vision.
- It's okay (and often necessary) to adapt, but avoid getting hijacked
 - Too much focus on other people's objectives, or the objectives of one department, can create imbalances
 - There's a skill to saying no to that which takes you too far from your objectives
 - For more on this, I recommend checking out Episode 10: Taking Time For Making Mine

EP 10 – Taking Time For Making Mine

 <https://www.chriskreuter.com/ep-10-taking-time-for-making-mine/>

- If it's within your power, align rewards & motivations
 - Who bears the most risk in your contracts & agreements?
 - Is a contractor engaged on a fixed-price contract? They're bearing the risk of cost-overruns if something goes wrong.
 - Or are they working under an open-ended, time-and-materials agreement, where you have to have a high-level of trust that they're being as effective as possible.
 - Are you in a position to reward (or be rewarded) if a project is done under budget and/or faster than expected?
 - Are your various stakeholders being held to a common definition of success? Or are each of them in it for themselves, being rewarded for their small contribution rather than the success of the entire project?
 - Is there clear agreement on how contingencies will be handled & negotiated?
 - If the customer inspects the work in progress and wants the bedroom painted blue instead of yellow - is there a clear process to determine who is responsible to bear the penalty of additional time and materials?

3. Materials

- What options are available to you?
- What can you realistically afford?
- Are your materials, tools, and training right-sized for your project?
- If your goal is to write a novel, should you buy a thousand-dollar Mont Blanc pen and custom gilded paper bound in a leather-bound journal to write it? Or a crayon on construction paper?
 - In these examples, both extremes still neglect the necessity of editing, and the ease that digital tools create.
- Do skills need to be learned or re-trained to properly execute on a project element?

- If so, can you practice on cheaper, more readily-available materials, saving your best material for the final effort?
 - For example: rapid prototyping, plotting on index cards, using scrap wood to test your new drill press
- What can fail or wear out?
 - As you're trying to build something, can outside elements wear down parts of what you've already built?
 - There's a risk of putting too much weight on something unfinished. If you put a roof on a house with a two walls, it's not going to hold up as long as one with four.
 - Likewise, make sure your walls are able to support the weight of what you put on them. That same room will collapse if your walls are flimsy or built slap-dash.

Let's pause for a moment and come back to the main point: It's hard to build walls while the house is on fire

- Focus on the difficulties, the stress and frustrations, of being both builder and firefighter.
- The constant need to triage problems & challenges as they arrive, assessing which have the most risk, are most deserving of your efforts - knowing that they're all distractions from your main objectives.
- At times you'll be forced to drop everything & be the firefighter:
 - As you do so: Ignore the ego's desire to look pristine, unsure, or infallible
 - Sometimes you have to trust others on your team to help you, or handle the fires on their own
 - Take care of the issue, repair any damage, and get back to the task at hand
 - Don't spend too much time dwelling on the fire, unless you're investigating to ensure it doesn't happen again.

- I've described handling these challenges by focusing on environment, objectives, and materials... but what about the foundation you're building upon?
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4. Foundation

- How strong is your foundation?
 - It's the support structure on which you're building your house
 - Is it old & sturdy, but experienced at handling the trials & tribulations of time?
 - Is it experienced, but in need to reinforcement to support your new project or product?
 - Has it been badly damaged & need of an overhaul?
 - Or is it unbuilt - A green-field project? This requires you to dig out, build the foundation first, before the walls can be started.
- Evaluate what elements make up the foundation for your project. Be clear on all of the elements necessary for success. These can include:
 - Personal health & well being
 - Your project team
 - Finances
 - Industry regulations & standards
 - Skills & experience
 - Education
 - Support network
 - How you're organized
 - Your guiding purpose or vision (and/or that of your organization)
 - Feedback: How do you know if or when there's a problem?
- There's a reason most foundations are made of concrete and the walls above made of wood: The foundation has to support more weight, hold everything else up.

Don't build shiny mansions on shoddy foundations

- Consider all the ways your foundation can be undermined:
 - Ill-conceived plans
 - Poor craftsmanship
 - Company in-fighting
 - Uninspired leadership
 - Supply-chain issues
 - Sides not adhering to their end of deals or contracts
- Some of these undermining elements are out of your control.
 - Are you able to build a foundation (or adapt the existing one) to prevent a storm from damaging that foundation?
 - The caveat here: Find the balance - build the right foundation for the conditions.
 - Don't overbuild the foundation expecting hurricanes when you're living in a desert
 - Or spend all your time & resources on building and/or maintaining an incredible foundation, leaving little time & resources for the house itself

5. Pace

- Building things properly take time: Planning, checking processes, verifying regulations, confirming specifications, to think.
- If you find yourself in constant, chaotic situations, or a high-paced corporate culture, it can be easy to fall into the trap of constant firefighting.
 - This high-alert, high pace “busyness” feels productive. But it’s a fast-track to burn-out.
 - Distraction leads to mistakes, delays, and projects that don’t deliver on their promise.
- There are plenty of jobs out there where constant firefighting is the reality.
 - For example: Fast food cooks, dress-shoes-on-the-ground stock-market traders

- But in those jobs, employees are asked to follow a process as efficiently as possible.
- You have very few builders and process changers in these organizations.
- They're purpose-built for efficiency & repeatability: In most cases trying to change things when it's not your responsibility is actively discouraged.
- Know what kind of organization you're in!
- Going back to our analogy: Would you buy a home built at a fast pace?
 - At best, you're in a cookie-cutter home alongside others built in an efficient, boring development. But it's at least a quality home built by experienced people.
 - At worst, you're in potential death trap, built slap-dash with little attention to quality or craftsmanship
- What methods can you use to control the pace with which you build?
 - Time-block planning: In the day-to-day, can you carve our time for the building tasks, but leave in wiggle room to firefight the issues of the day?
 - Communication: Set the expectations for the team - isolate check-ins to work problems as a group within defined time windows
 - Reduce friction: Can you reduce, or even eliminate, elements that can cause fires in the first place? Or by working more methodically, can you reduce the risk of starting a fire?
 - Project planning: Depending on the complexity of your house, use tools that help identify interdependencies, milestones, and organize the materials needed at each stage. Examples here would be flowcharts, Gantt charts, project plans, contract deliverables list, the contract itself, Kanban boards, and many more.
 - Mental models: Stories or analogies that provide a common blueprint for you & your team to follow. An agreement on how you'll handle & communicate goals, objectives, and problems.
 - Saying no: Can you identify what small fires you can let burn? Where & when can you apply blinders so you can stay focused on building something great?

