

The Silent Middle

The hidden cost inside
high-performing
organisations



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**Nothing appears
to be wrong.**

**And that's exactly
the problem.**

Introduction

There is a category of professional I have worked with consistently over the years, and yet you will not find them named in organisational diagnostics, nor clearly identified in the language used to describe performance, risk, or wellbeing.

They are not the individuals who are failing, and they are not the ones who present as visibly overwhelmed. In most cases, they are the opposite. They are capable, measured, and reliable. They are trusted to hold responsibility, to lead conversations, to manage complexity, and to maintain momentum in environments where consistency is valued.

From the outside, there is no indication that anything is misaligned and this is the issue. How the consistent performance is being sustained is not immediately obvious.

When the conversation moves beyond output and begins to examine the experience of maintaining that level of performance, a different picture begins to form. It is not a picture of failure or fragility. It is a picture of effort that is not accounted for, and of internal load that does not interrupt delivery, but sits alongside it.

The language is often measured when it first appears. People will talk about pressure, about wanting to be sharper, about holding themselves to a high standard. There is usually an assumption that what they are experiencing is manageable, that it sits within their control, and that the answer is to adjust how they approach the work.

It is only as the detail emerges that the pattern becomes clearer.

What appears composed requires tremendous effort. Confidence is put on like a coat to hide the imposter beneath. Controlling everything feels safe, but it requires huge amounts of work.

This is what I call the Silent Middle.

The Silent Middle is the collective term for a group of high-performing individuals who continue to deliver, progress, and hold responsibility within an organisation, while carrying a sustained level of internal load that shapes how they operate but is not visible in the outcomes they produce.

They sit between visible success and visible struggle. They are not underperforming, and they are not in crisis. They are functioning, often at a high level, but the way that performance is being maintained requires ongoing self-management that remains largely unseen.

The Silent Middle does not emerge suddenly, nor does it present in a way that draws attention to itself. It develops gradually, often alongside progression, and is reinforced by the very outcomes that it helps to produce.

Individuals learn what is expected of them, not only in terms of delivery, but in how they present, how they communicate, and how they respond under pressure. These adaptations are not superficial. They are informed, considered responses to the environments in which they operate, shaped by childhood experiences and reinforced over time.

They become effective, and because they become effective, they are repeated.

What begins as adjustment becomes habit. What becomes habitual becomes embedded. Once embedded, it is rarely questioned, particularly when it continues to produce results. The individual remains credible and so they are offered more responsibility, and in many cases, a promotion.

The mechanism through which that position is maintained is not examined. It sits in the ongoing management of self, in the attention given to how something is said as much as what is said, in the consideration of how a decision will be received before it is expressed, and in the regulation of response in moments where the natural reaction would be different.

This is not occasional pressure. It is a sustained way of operating and it's exhausting.

Organisations are structured to respond to what can be observed. Performance is measured, engagement is tracked, and disruption, when it becomes visible, is addressed. The Silent Middle sits outside of these signals. There is no immediate decline in output, no visible interruption, and no clear point at which the individual can be said to be struggling in a way that requires intervention which means the experience of the individual remains largely unexplored.

What sits beneath that continued performance is not instability.

It is management.

Decisions are considered with care, sometimes repeatedly. Communication is shaped in advance. Emotional responses are moderated in real time. There is an ongoing awareness of expectation, and a corresponding effort to meet it without deviation.

The absence of visible strain is interpreted as evidence that the strain is not present.

It is present.

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They are not struggling to perform.

They are working to sustain how that performance is experienced.”

What I Mean By The Silent Middle

The Silent Middle sits in a space that is rarely named because it does not disrupt performance in a way that demands attention. Individuals operating within it continue to deliver, often at a high level, maintaining credibility, progression, and trust, while carrying a level of internal load that shapes how they think, how they decide, and how they lead.

They are not disengaged. They remain committed to their role, to their team, and to the outcomes they are responsible for delivering. In many cases, their level of commitment is one of the reasons the Silent Middle develops and persists.

They care about the work, they care about how they are perceived, and they care about the impact they have. What changes is not the level of care, but how that care is managed. The line between responsibility and pressure becomes less distinct. The space between action and reflection becomes narrower. The ability to step out of role, even temporarily, becomes less accessible, not because time is unavailable, but because the role becomes continuous. There is less separation between the individual and the role they perform, and over time that distinction becomes harder to re-establish.

If you listen closely to how people describe their experience, there is a consistency in how they frame it. There is a tendency to position what they are navigating as something that sits within their control, something that can be improved through increased effort or better discipline.

They will say that they need to manage it better, that they should be able to handle it, that they just need to be sharper. These statements are not expressions of inadequacy. They are expressions of ownership. But they also indicate where the responsibility is being held.

When the experience is internalised in this way, the response is also internalised. The individual adapts, adjusts, and continues, and because they continue to deliver, the pattern remains intact. What is not examined is whether the pattern itself is sustainable, or whether the effort required to maintain it is necessary.

And because there is no visible disruption, there is no external pressure to examine it.

The system continues to reward the outcome.

The individual continues to carry the load.

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The absence of visible strain is interpreted as evidence that the strain is not present.”

The Silent Middle Is Growing

The conditions in which leadership now operates have shifted in ways we couldn't have predicted. We thought the Pandemic has shaken things up with hybrid working, and then the AI train arrived, bringing with it a whirlwind of high speed change.

Leaders are expected to hold multiple positions at once. They are required to be decisive while remaining inclusive, to maintain pace while allowing space, and to drive outcomes while creating environments where others can contribute effectively. These are not tensions that can be resolved and removed. They remain present, requiring continuous management rather than a single point of decision.

What has changed is where that management sits and this increasingly sits within the individual. Expectations have expanded, but the structures that support those expectations have not evolved at the same pace. There is an implicit assumption that capability will stretch to meet demand, and when that happens successfully, it reinforces the belief that the conditions under which that performance is achieved are sustainable.

They are not examined. They are absorbed.

The requirement is to operate with clarity, consistency, and control in environments that are often ambiguous, fast-moving, and interconnected. Decisions need to be made with incomplete information. Communication needs to land across multiple audiences with differing priorities. Leadership needs to be demonstrated in ways that are both visible and measured. This reduces the margin for visible uncertainty.

It also increases the level of internal management required to maintain composure, clarity, and control in situations where those conditions are not naturally present.

At the same time, the ability to continue delivering under pressure is frequently interpreted as evidence that the pressure itself is manageable. If performance remains consistent, there is little reason within most systems to question the conditions under which that performance is being achieved. Performance becomes the signal. Experience does not. Which means that as long as the outcome is delivered, the method through which it is sustained remains largely invisible.

We like to think that leadership style has changed, and the 1980's hierarchical approach departed in the noughties, but the absolute truth is, in many organisations it hasn't. Shouting in the boardroom is still a thing, and so is control, manipulation, and fear. This further drives the masking as individuals strive to be perfect to avoid detection, and keep the peace to avoid conflict.

This is where the Silent Middle continues to grow.

Not because individuals are becoming less capable, but because the gap between what is required externally and what is experienced internally is increasing, and that gap is being managed rather than addressed.

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**What could be directed
outward is being
directed inward.”**

**It is not what
people are doing.**

**It is what they are
managing in order
to keep doing it.**

The Paseda360 Pretender Model

As the Silent Middle develops, the way individuals sustain their performance begins to follow patterns that are both consistent and predictable. These patterns are rarely named, and even less frequently challenged, because they work. They allow the individual to continue operating at a level that meets expectation, often exceeding it, while managing the internal experience that sits beneath.

Over time, these patterns become habitual, and we wear them like masks.

They sit beneath behaviour, shaping response before it is fully considered. They are not personality types, and they are not fixed identities. They are learned responses to pressure, reinforced through experience, and maintained because they continue to deliver results.

Each mask is driven by a need.

- **Recognition.**
- **Approval.**
- **Sympathy.**
- **Compliance.**

Each mask protects something that feels essential to maintain.

- **Reputation.**
- **Belonging.**
- **Worth.**
- **Control.**

And beneath each one sits a belief that governs behaviour quietly but consistently.

The Perfectionist Pretender Mask

The Perfectionist Pretender is not simply someone who holds high standards. They are protecting how they are seen, and the quality of what they produce becomes the mechanism through which that protection is maintained.

They are driven by a need for recognition and validation, not in a superficial sense, but in a way that confirms that what they produce reflects well on them and reinforces how they are perceived. Work is refined, revisited, and extended, not because the initial version was insufficient, but because releasing something too early introduces a level of risk that feels disproportionate.

Time is not only spent on the work itself. It is spent anticipating how that work will be received.

What is being managed is not just the output. It is the interpretation of that output.

This often results in a delay that is not recognised as hesitation, because the work continues to improve, but the point at which it is shared moves further away. The standard is not only high. It is continuously elevated.

What is being protected is reputation.

The belief underneath it is rarely examined. That how I am seen is determined by what I produce, and that what I produce must not fall short.

The People Pleaser Pretender Mask

The People Pleaser Pretender is not simply collaborative and caring. They are managing approval and acceptance in real time, adjusting their behaviour in response to how others are perceived to be responding.

They are highly attuned to shifts in tone, in energy, and in engagement. They notice when alignment changes, even subtly, and they respond quickly to restore it. Disagreement is not absent, but it is often softened, delayed, or reframed in a way that reduces the likelihood of disruption.

This is not a lack of perspective.

It is the management of how that perspective is expressed.

Contributions are shaped to maintain connection, and positions are adjusted to preserve cohesion. The individual remains engaged, supportive, and responsive, but the expression of their thinking is filtered through the requirement to maintain approval.

Over time, this can result in a narrowing of contribution, not because the individual has less to offer, but because what is offered is continuously moderated.

What is being protected is belonging.

The belief underneath it is rarely stated directly, but it is consistently present. That acceptance is conditional, and that maintaining it requires adjustment.

The Persecutor of Self Pretender Mask

The Persecutor of Self Pretender directs pressure inward, often immediately and without pause for thought. Responsibility is assumed quickly, and reflection moves rapidly into evaluation, which then becomes criticism.

There is very little space between experience and judgement.

Moments that pass externally continue internally, replayed and reassessed in a way that reinforces the individual's responsibility for the outcome. The internal standard is high, but it is also rigid, leaving little room for context or variation.

What appears externally as accountability is experienced internally as pressure.

The individual does not wait for feedback.

They provide it to themselves.

Relentlessly.

What is being sought is not performance itself, but relief from the pressure that has already been created.

What is being protected is worth.

The belief underneath it is deeply embedded. That without pressure, performance will reduce, and if performance reduces, value reduces with it.

The Persecutor of Others Pretender Mask

The Persecutor of Others Pretender directs pressure outward.

Control becomes the mechanism through which uncertainty is managed. Expectations are expressed clearly and often firmly, particularly when outcomes feel at risk. Tolerance reduces when progress is not aligned with expectation, and communication becomes sharper, more direct, and more focused on restoring movement.

This is not about stepping in when things feel uncertain.

It is about removing uncertainty by demanding alignment from others.

Compliance becomes the route to stability.

Emotional distance reduces complexity.

By narrowing the focus to what needs to be done, the individual reduces the need to engage with the relational dynamics that may otherwise slow progress.

What is being protected is control.

The belief underneath it is consistent. That without control, things will not hold, and if things do not hold, the consequences will escalate.

How These Patterns Operate

These masks do not sit in isolation. They move between contexts, combine within the same situation, and shift depending on what is being required of the individual at any given time. A leader may refine work to protect reputation, adjust their position to maintain approval, criticise themselves when something does not land as intended, and then apply pressure outward when outcomes feel at risk.

This is not inconsistency.

It is adaptation.

And because each of these masks works, because each of them allows the individual to continue performing, they are reinforced.

They become the mechanism through which performance is sustained.

Not through capability alone.

Through continuous self-management that sits alongside it.



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**They are not adapting
to succeed.**

**They are adapting to
be accepted.”**

The Cost

The Silent Middle does not interrupt performance, which is precisely why it remains largely unexamined, but it reshapes that performance in ways that extend beyond output and begin to influence behaviour, relationships, and long-term sustainability.

At face value, the organisation continues to receive what it expects. Targets are met, deadlines are delivered, and responsibility is maintained. There is little immediate incentive to question what sits beneath that consistency, because the visible indicators suggest that everything is working.

The difficulty is that performance is being maintained alongside a level of internal management that does not remain contained. It expresses itself.

Decision-making becomes more deliberate, not because clarity is lacking, but because each decision carries an additional layer of consideration around how it will be received and what consequence it may trigger. Communication becomes more constructed, shaped in advance to manage interpretation rather than simply convey intent.

This does not remove effectiveness. It alters behaviour. What begins as careful consideration can become hesitation. What begins as measured communication can become guarded. What begins as considering whether to speak up can become suppression.

These shifts are often subtle at first, but they are felt by those around them.

Conversations become less direct. Challenge is delayed or softened to the point where it loses its impact. Feedback is filtered, not only for accuracy, but for acceptability. Alignment appears present, but it has not been fully tested.

The individual hits the KPI'S but the environment around them becomes less honest.

This is where the cost begins to extend beyond the individual.

When masking becomes the mechanism through which performance is sustained, behaviour changes in ways that are not always attributed to that pressure. Frustration surfaces more quickly in moments where control feels reduced. Patience shortens when outcomes are uncertain. Tolerance fluctuates depending on the level of internal load being carried at any given time.

You can guarantee that when an individual shows up with a mask, their worst self will follow shortly afterwards. It's like night following day. Consistently masking the real self requires such effort, our worst self leaks through to bring relief.

If the worst self does not show up in the meeting, it shows up in the corridor. If it does not show up at work, it shows up at home.

It shows up in how people speak to those closest to them, in how present they are in their relationships, and in how they regulate themselves when the requirement to maintain composure is removed.

Drinking increases. Eating becomes less conscious. Gambling, gaming, scrolling, and other forms of distraction begin to take up more space. Disconnection becomes easier than engagement.

Relationships begin to feel the strain.

And as those relationships strain, the individual returns to work carrying more than they were before.

The need to manage increases.

The mask tightens.

From an organisational perspective, this is rarely connected back to performance, because performance, in isolation, remains intact. What is not accounted for is the behavioural impact that sits alongside it, and the way that impact influences team dynamics, trust, and psychological safety over time.

People do not experience leadership through KPIs. They experience it through behaviour. And behaviour, under sustained internal load, changes. There is also a cost in capacity that is not immediately visible.

A significant proportion of cognitive and emotional resource is directed towards self-editing, towards monitoring tone, adjusting response, and maintaining alignment with expectation. That capacity is no longer available for problem-solving, for creativity, or for thinking beyond the immediate requirement.

It is being used to maintain position. What could be directed outward is being directed inward. The organisation continues to receive performance, but it does not receive the full extent of what that individual is capable of contributing.

This is not a marginal difference. It is material.

Over time, this way of operating reaches a limit.

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**The worst self does
not disappear.**

It is managed.”

The Silent Middle has a shelf life.

Sustained masking requires sustained energy, and that energy is not infinite. As the gap between how the individual operates and what they are experiencing internally widens, the effort required to maintain that gap increases.

At a certain point, it is no longer sustainable.

This does not always present as burnout in the way organisations expect. It may present as disengagement, as withdrawal, as a decision to leave, or as a gradual reduction in discretionary effort that is difficult to attribute to a single cause.

In some cases, it presents as a complete shift.

The individual who has been consistent, reliable, and high-performing becomes unavailable in ways that are difficult to explain through performance history alone.

By the time this point is reached, the cost has already been incurred.

The individual has been carrying it for some time.

The organisation has simply not been measuring it.





They are not leaving because they cannot perform.

They are leaving because of the way they have had to perform."

The Opportunity

Addressing the Silent Middle requires a shift to understand performance through a different lens. Performance, as it is typically measured, captures output. It reflects what is delivered, what is achieved, and what is visible. It does not capture the experience of producing that output, and it is within that experience that both the cost and the opportunity sit.

If that experience remains unexplored, the masks remain intact.

The starting point is not to reduce expectation, remove pressure, or lower standards. The individuals operating within the Silent Middle are not lacking capability, and they do not require simplification of their role. What is required is an understanding of how that capability is currently being accessed, and how much of it is being restricted by the level of internal management sitting alongside it.

This begins with awareness, but not awareness in the reflective sense of looking back after the fact. It requires an operational level of awareness, one that allows individuals to recognise, in real time, when they are moving into self-management, when they are editing, adjusting, or containing, and what is driving that response in the moment.

Without this, behaviour remains automatic. With it, behaviour becomes visible. And once it is visible, it can be interrupted.

Emotional regulation sits at the centre of this shift, not as an additional skill to be layered onto existing capability, but as the mechanism that creates space between stimulus and response. Without regulation, individuals default to the patterns that have previously worked, because those patterns are efficient and familiar. With regulation, there is a pause that allows access to a broader range of response.

This is where behaviour begins to change. We work at a deep level to understand how the individual relies on the masks and why, and where the need to wear them derives from. There is always a root cause. When we work with that people are no longer required to rely on the same patterns to maintain control, approval, or perception.

As that reliance reduces, so does the level of internal management.

What follows is not a loss of performance. It is a release of capacity.

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**What is restricted
is not capability.
It is access.”**

The energy that was previously directed towards monitoring, adjusting, and maintaining can be redirected towards the work itself. Thinking becomes less constrained. Communication becomes more direct. Challenge becomes more immediate and more useful. Decision-making becomes clearer, not because decisions are easier, but because they are no longer carrying the same additional layer of interpretation.

The individual does not become someone different.

They become less managed.

This has a direct impact on behaviour.

The need to self-edit reduces, which increases consistency between what is thought and what is said. Feedback becomes more accurate because it is less filtered. Relationships strengthen because they are based on clearer interaction rather than maintained alignment. The environment changes, not through initiative, but through behaviour.

Teams experience greater clarity. Conversations become more honest. Alignment is tested rather than assumed.

What improves is not only performance. It is the quality of how that performance is experienced by others.

There is also a shift in sustainability. When the internal load reduces, the gap between how the individual operates and what they are experiencing internally narrows. The effort required to maintain performance decreases, and the shelf life of that performance extends. Individuals are no longer required to carry the same level of ongoing strain to deliver at the same level.

This is where the organisational impact becomes clear.

The same individuals who were already delivering begin to operate with greater capacity, greater clarity, and greater behavioural consistency. The organisation does not need to replace them, recover them, or manage their exit.

It benefits from what was already there, but previously restricted.

This is not about doing more with less. It is about accessing more of what already exists.

The Silent Middle represents a point of leverage that is often overlooked because it does not present as a problem. The individuals within it are already performing, already progressing, and already trusted.

They do not require capability to be built. They require capacity to be released.

When that happens, the shift is not gradual. It is immediate.

Clarity returns because it was always present. Speed returns because it was never lost. Challenge returns because it was never absent.

What changes is not the capability itself. It is the conditions under which that capability is accessed. And when those conditions change, performance does not need to be increased. It becomes easier to sustain.



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**The Silent Middle does not
reduce performance.**

**It changes how that
performance is sustained.”**

Final Thoughts

If the Silent Middle exists within your organisation, it is already shaping performance.

It is influencing how decisions are made, how conversations are held, and how leadership is experienced, often without being recognised as a distinct dynamic.

It does not present as a problem.

It presents as performance.

Which is why it is rarely examined.

The question is not whether it is present.

The question is whether you are prepared to recognise it.