

Articles for Managers

Delegation: The Forgotten Management Tool

by Ian Cook



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"I never get to the truly managerial parts of my own job."

"I'm staying too late at night and working too many weekends."

"_____ is really ready to advance but I have no job to promote him/her to right now"

"If I don't give my best people some new challenges soon, I may lose them."

Sound familiar? Is this what you find yourself saying (or thinking) these days? You've tried all the time management techniques. You've even upgraded your software and tried (unsuccessfully) to re-negotiate your job objectives with your boss. And you have some talented people that are demotivated by doing the same duties month-after-month.

"Delegating is a great way to create that 'right fit'"

Maybe it's time to consider *delegating* an element or two of your job.

Why We Don't Like to Delegate

But wait a minute! We managers are not natural delegators. We're programmed to exercise our authority. We got to this exalted level in the organization by successfully solving problems, not passing them off to others.

There are at least six reasons why we resist delegating a task or decision to our staff. Here they are below, along with our "self-talk" that accompanies them:

1. Power

If I hold on to the task or at least retain the final say over it, I maintain control. They must continue to rely on me. No, thank you. I'll do it myself and stay the "boss."

2. Trust

I just don't trust them to do the job properly (i.e. to **my** satisfaction and

standards). They're not ready yet, anyway. They lack the experience. Besides, if they blow the job or make a bad decision, it could be costly...and you-know-who will have to answer for that. No, it's safer to do it myself.

3. Self-Confidence

If I hand off a basic duty or decision like this one, what will I do? Truth be told, I'm not sure how to do some of those higher level, strategic type tasks in my "manager" job description. No, it's easier for me to look busy and on-the-ball by doing lower-level tasks that I know I can handle.

4. Fear

My staff is already overloaded and they don't hesitate to remind me of the fact. If I approach them with something new to do, they'll be really angry. I can just hear them now, "Oh yeah, and just which part of my job do you expect me to drop in order to do this **extra** work for you?" No, it's just less confrontational to do it myself.

5. Time

It will take too long to show them how to do this. Besides, I can have it done in the time it takes just to explain it to them. And this way I won't have to spend time coaching and checking up on them. No, it's less hassle to do it myself.

6. Feels Good!

Man, I love that sense of accomplishment when I complete a task, make a decision, and solve a problem. I can check it off. I can tell others about it. Why would I want to give up this great feeling? No, I'll hang on to the task, thank you very much.

Why we shouldn't resist it

What you heard above is the view purely from the manager's perspective. Now

consider things from the *manager-as-leader's* perspective. Here are three excellent reasons in favor of delegating:

- *It frees you up to do the value-added work you are paid for.* This work typically involves higher-level issues around strategic direction, resources, system problems, coaching, and interfacing with the wider organization and beyond. These challenges may put you on a steep learning curve but it is by performing this part of your job that you will ultimately succeed as a manager.
- *It offers an opportunity to develop, motivate and assess employees.* Many—not all—employees will be highly motivated by an assignment or new responsibility that invites them to grow, learn some new skills, enrich their job, and perhaps gain a higher profile.
- *It builds accountability and independence in your staff.* Management philosopher Peter Koestenbaum says that if a leader is not developing and supporting the accountability of his or her staff, he/she is, abandoning them (to dependency and stagnation).

How to delegate

First of all, select what to delegate. Pick a task or new responsibility that is perhaps less challenging to you but will stretch and develop the employee(s) in question. Then, stipulate the goal—the result you are looking for—and how it will be measured. But take a caution from no less a leader than General George Patton: “Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity.”

Secondly, decide on how much authority you will give them. Clarify which decisions they (1) can make totally on their own, (2) can make but keep you informed, (3) must run by you first for approval, (4) will be making jointly with you, or (5) must have you make for them. The best practice is to hand off as much as you personally can tolerate and the situation will allow.

Next, clearly communicate precisely what you are delegating. Cover what is to be done, by when, why (the background and reasons), allowable resources, any limits on their authority for decision-making and, of course, the benefits to them for taking on this responsibility. As you strive for mutual understanding and agreement, allow them to push back, to negotiate around the

parameters...this is what independent people who take on full accountability for their commitments typically do before they make a commitment that they intend to keep!

Then, check for mutual understanding around what was agreed. Sometimes employees are reluctant to disagree directly with you. They may not agree or understand but they say “yes” to you anyway because they don’t want to come across as dumb or difficult.

Provide support, as appropriate. This may mean just being available if they need you or you might go so far as to schedule periodic progress update meetings. Nevertheless, this is your opportunity to coach, guide, challenge and encourage your protégé employee(s).

Finally, follow up, evaluate and recognize work well done.

“Too many managers overlook the power of delegation as a development tool.”

Recent research from the Gallup organization indicates that the most prominent practice of “great managers” is *finding the right fit* between employees’ skills and the work to be done. Delegating is a great way to create that “right fit.”

Too many managers overlook the power of delegation as a development tool. Former CEO of AES, Dennis Bakke, had his “80/20 rule.” It said that AES people should spend 80% of their time on their primary roles (i.e. their job description duties) and 20% on special tasks, giving advice, learning new skills, and projects not necessarily related to their official job. This ensured that work was challenging, motivating and, yes, even fun.

What can you delegate and to whom? Why not create some opportunities? Even if you don’t do it for staff development, do it to free yourself up for that part of your job that really justifies the big bucks they pay you.

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