

DELEGATION – The Invaluable Management Skill

People who get things done seldom do it all themselves and can be very creative. Tom Sawyer made the job of whitewashing a fence so fascinating his playmates paid him to let them help him! As a child, Andrew Carnegie needed help to take care of his increasing rabbit family and offered to name a rabbit for any friend who helped him care for them. He used this naming method throughout his business life to engage others in his work and to amass a fortune. Thomas Edison was famous and admired for his ability to engage young engineers to work with him and as a result, he created the first research group in the world. Alfred Nobel was quoted saying:

“It is my rule never to do myself what another could do better, or even as well. Otherwise, I should long ago have been worn out and probably ruined as well, for if you try to do everything yourself in a large concern, the result will be that nothing will be done properly.”

There is no way managers can get the work done except through the efforts of those who work directly for them. Unless managers delegate they will be overwhelmed with work. As long as you can keep all of the duties to yourself and do not delegate, you can control the result. However, you will probably be less effective than you would be if you learn to delegate because you have a limited number of hours in the day and you will find yourself doing work that is better performed by those with far fewer skills than you. You will spend less time on those things that only you should do, which are most critical to the success of your business.

Delegation can dramatically expand your ability to get things done. It lets you use the skills, time and talent of those who work for you and it frees you up to do the things that only you should be doing. But, delegating is risky. What if they do it wrong? What if they do the wrong thing? What if the result is inferior? These are legitimate concerns and are at the heart of why some managers will not delegate. They understand they cannot delegate the ultimate accountability and they fear being blamed for the failure.

To focus your time on those things you should be doing and delegate with confidence, you need to learn when to delegate, what to delegate, how to delegate, and which employees are candidates for delegation. You will need to learn the difference between delegating and dumping. Dumping is the simple act of moving your duties to another person without regard for whether the person is the appropriate person, whereas delegation is a thoughtful and deliberate process.

Delegating includes assigning responsibility and authority to perform specific work to an employee with the knowledge, skill and ability to do the work successfully. Assigning only the responsibility, without the authority, is insanity and results in an employee who is frustrated by the inability to get anything done. Assigning authority with no responsibility is anarchy.

WHY MANAGERS WILL NOT DELEGATE

The number one reason managers do not delegate is lack of confidence that others can do the job as well as “me.”

DELEGATION KILLER

“If you want the job done right, do it yourself.”

Frank Woolworth, who failed in his first attempt to start a five-and-dime store, admitted that his own serious illness forced him to delegate work and said, “*I broke myself of the conceit that I could buy goods, display goods, run stores, and do everything else better than any man associated with me. That marked the beginning of my success.*”

It is true that the employee to whom you delegate may not do the job as well as you. But, effective managers develop a tolerance for imperfection and commit to helping employees learn.

Unwilling to invest the upfront time is the second reason for failure to delegate. It takes time to train employees to do the work. Next time a manager says, “*I can do it myself faster than I can train it,*” remind that manager that it is true, but he will be doing it over and over and continue to waste time doing what others can and should do. The upfront investment has a long-term payoff.

Another less discussed reason managers fail to delegate is insecurity and fear. They do not trust their own abilities and they fear they will be replaced if employees learn what they do. Talented, competent and secure managers recognize that teaching employees to do what they do, assures they will expand their influence and gives them the freedom to accept greater and more responsible roles. The steps to delegation are easy to identify:

SELECT THE WORK

There are levels of work that qualify for delegation.

- Level One:* You must do it; the work may not be delegated as it needs your personal attention.
- Level Two:* You should do it, but someone else could help you with parts of it.
- Level Three:* You could do it, but others could do it if given an opportunity.
- Level Four:* Others should do it, but you can do it if you have time.
- Level Five:* Other must do it because it is a total waste of your time.

All work, except *Level One*, can be delegated. Here are the steps and how to do it.

IDENTIFY THE EMPLOYEE

Assign the responsibility to the employee(s) who has the knowledge, skill and ability to perform the work or who can learn how to perform the work. Assigning work to the wrong person assures failure. Agree on exactly what is expected and when the work will be completed.

PROVIDE RESOURCES

Make certain the employee has both the responsibility and authority to get the work done. This means making certain the employee has the training, the resources, the time to get the work done, and whatever else it takes.

SERVE AS A RESOURCE

Unlike the manager who dumps work and disappears, the effective delegator serves as a resource to employees of delegated work and is available to remove obstacles and barriers. Answering questions and providing encouragement is valuable to building employee confidence. Since the ultimate accountability remains with the manager, there is a vested interest in remaining engaged throughout the process. Don't hover; just be accessible.

MONITOR THE RESULTS

Don Patterson, a respected CEO of a large retail drug chain, was known for his skill as a delegator. He once said, *"If you want to know if a tree is growing, count the leaves; don't yank it up by the roots and shake off the dirt."* He taught his young managers to focus on the results when monitoring delegated work and go look at what has been accomplished, instead of just interrogating the employee.

At the start of any delegated project, agree on a schedule when the employee will report on how much work has been finished. Requiring an employee to report results, instead of activity, prevents surprises. Actually, as a manager, you really do not care what the employee is doing at any given time; you are interested in what has been FINISHED. This also allows the manager to determine if the level of progress at any given time is acceptable or if the employee needs help.

Many managers forget to establish a monitoring schedule. Without a monitoring schedule, the employees may question why the manager asks, *"How are you doing?"* and feel the manager does not trust them to do the work.

LEVELS OF DELEGATION

Delegating work does not mean losing control. Some work can be delegated and forgotten while other work needs to be closely tethered. It is generally agreed there are six levels of delegation.

1. Get the facts and I will decide. The employee is a researcher. Use this for high-risk work where there is a high potential for loss or failure.
2. Recommend action and I will decide. The employee does the research and the legwork. Use this if there is some risk of loss or other damage to the business.
3. Decide action, but wait for an okay from me. The employee handles all of the research and the frontend work up to the decision time. Use this if there are any variables the employee may not understand before acting.
4. Decide and act unless I say no. The employee handles all of the work but informs the manager before taking action. Use this for low risk work.
5. Act and don't tell me. Use this for routine work with virtually no risk.

Many employment relationships have been broken because of misunderstanding about who was to do what and when.

BEWARE OF DELEGATING UP

Some employees will resist delegation. There are many reasons. When employees do not understand the role of a manager or that delegation is part of a manager's job, they may resist delegation because they

believe that the manager is pushing work job off on the employees. Some employees resist delegation because they do not want to accept responsibility. Unmotivated employees are just looking for ways to avoid work.

There are two well-known responses from employees who resist delegation. One way to delegate the work back up to the manager is to say, “*I don’t know how.*” The naïve manager will take back the delegation and do the work. It was the goal of the employee to get out of the work and it worked. The appropriate response is, “*I will help you learn.*”

Another successful way to delegate work back to the manager is to mess it up! The naïve and frustrated manager takes the work back and gives it to another more willing employee. The appropriate approach is to make sure the employee receives training and keeps the delegated work. I recently listened to an inept manager explain that her highly paid employee has only one-half of a job because she made so many mistakes that she took away half of the delegated work and assigned it to her co-workers. Instead of addressing the problem when it occurred, she is now struggling with an unproductive employee wasting company money. The employee got out of work, her co-workers are overworked, but the manager is still accountable.

Delegating involves risks, but has great rewards. It frees a manager up to focus on the work that only the manager should do. It allows the manager to accomplish greater results. It requires a commitment to select the right person, assure the employee(s) has the training and resources, and remain involved to assure a successful outcome. It is worth it.

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Nancye can be reached at:

Nancye M. Combs, AEP•SPHR
HR Enterprise, Inc.
P.O. Box 6507 • Louisville, KY 40206-0507