

A middle-aged man with a mustache, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and striped tie, is smiling and looking towards the camera. He is holding a blue marker in his right hand. The background is a bright, slightly blurred office setting.

# Effective Delegation

## A Win-Win Strategy

Wayne Turk

Some people think that delegation is having subordinates do what the manager doesn't want to do. No, that isn't delegation; it is shirking your duties. Okay then, so what is delegation? Delegation is the process of giving decision-making authority and/or the responsibility for completing certain tasks to lower-level employees. The tasks that are delegated are usually management-level tasks and should be delegated for a better reason than "I didn't want to do it myself."

Why are some managers leery of delegation? There's the rarely true but widely held belief that if you want it done right, you have to do it yourself because, after all, the final responsibility for successful completion of a task lies with the manager. There are other reasons that managers don't delegate: not understanding the benefits of delegation, no trust in their subordinates, fear of being seen as lazy, reluctance to take risks, feeling that it would be quicker to do it yourself than taking time to explain the task to someone, and fear of competition from subordinates. The last is

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especially true. Many managers are afraid that if they train a subordinate too well, he or she will get promoted and they will lose him or—even worse—take the manager's own job. And some managers just lack the competencies or are afraid that they lack what it takes to delegate effectively. They may have chosen the wrong tasks to delegate or the wrong person to trust in the past. They may lack the communication skills and/or the time to provide adequate direction to the subordinate when delegating.

### **Why Delegate?**

So why should you delegate? I can come up with a half dozen reasons quickly. There are probably more that you can add.

You relieve yourself of some of your duties. This gives you more time to spend on other tasks, allowing you to do a better job and ultimately to take on more advanced tasks that will prepare you for future opportunities when they become available. It also may give you more time to work on new projects or ideas for improvement in your area.

When you delegate, you create a team that gets more accomplished in a shorter time. Time is almost always in short supply, especially if you are working on a project with a specified schedule.

You lower your stress level. You identify tasks that can be accomplished by others on your team. It's a great way to develop their skills, and, by handing off some of your tasks to your people, you will lower your stress level during the workday and go home at the end of the day satisfied that your team accomplished more.

Delegation creates motivation. When you delegate tasks that help others increase their experience and capabilities, they are more motivated because they see that you trust them to get the job done. When your people are motivated, they may take more initiative to get the delegated tasks done better, as well as their other work; create more innovative solutions; have higher morale; and be willing to take on more responsibilities.

You build a stronger team by developing the people who work for you. On an individual level, your employees learn more, can do more, and are more ready for promotions and/or increased responsibilities. This helps them, the team, and the organization.

You help yourself and your own career. When you delegate, you become known within the organization as a good manager who develops people. When you achieve success by developing your people, it shows anyone watching how good you are. Whether it's management, other teams, or individuals, people will take note and will want to work for you, knowing you create an environment that will help them prepare to move upward. And higher levels of management may decide you are more ready to move up, too.

Of course, there are dangers and drawbacks to delegation. Nothing is perfect. The biggest danger is that the delegated task won't get accomplished successfully. If you delegate a task to the wrong person, don't give the necessary resources and tools, or don't communicate the task and goal sufficiently, you may find yourself having to explain why the job didn't get done. It can also hurt the employee's career—as well as yours—if this happens.

### **How to Delegate**

Before you delegate a task, you have to understand it and know what result(s) you want to see. You have to know how long it should take. You have to know what tools and resources are required. And finally, you have to be able to communicate all of this information to the employee. You might even need to provide training or guidance on how to do the task.

Pick a subordinate whom you see as motivated to take on the responsibility and capable of accomplishing the task—though as long as the person is motivated, you can teach him what he needs to know. Choosing someone who isn't motivated, even if he has the skills, is a big mistake. You run into the danger not having the task accomplished successfully and on time.

Talk to the person. Communicate the task and ensure that she understands the task, the schedule, the resources available, and the required result(s); and knows the consequences of not completing the task and the rewards for completing the task. All of this has to be clearly communicated. Ask questions. Make sure that she understands. Get her to explain it all back to you.

Follow up occasionally, particularly if it is a lengthy task. Find out if the resources were actually what were needed and if they truly have been, and continue to be, available. Inquire about any barriers, obstacles, or complications that might have arisen—people, technology, organizational restrictions or policies, lack of knowledge, or anything else. If there are barriers, help remove or break them down. Don't let something that you could have helped with be the cause of the employee's failure.

Encourage the employee. Let him know you have confidence in him. Make sure you continue to give feedback and encouragement.

But what if the person isn't progressing on the task? What options do you have to make it successful? Talk to her and find out if you need to provide additional training, tools, time, or people to assist. If so, do it (along with that continuing encouragement).

If the employee doesn't seem suited for the task, what do you do? Again, openly and honestly talk to the person. Does he want to continue? Can he get the job done? If either you or

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**Theodore Roosevelt**



the employee should decide he can't do it, assign the task to another person or take it over yourself. That is a last resort, though, and must be done in such a way that it doesn't damage the employee's confidence and morale. If he is a good employee (and he must be or you wouldn't have delegated the task to him), you don't want to lose or discourage him. Explain why you are relieving him and also that it won't affect his performance appraisal. Also explain that it may (or may not, depending) affect his opportunity for other tasks. Be honest about it.

When the task is complete, recognize and reward the person. If you told her that there would be a reward, follow up and make sure that it happens. Even if there is no tangible reward, the least that it deserves is a "thank you" for the work. This will enhance the employee's motivation and authority for future assignments. It also provides an important message to others that successful completion of tasks is acknowledged and rewarded. False or broken promises lead to discontent, and that usually hurts you.

### **Delegation Don'ts**

One very typical delegation error is to delegate work but not assign the authority to make and implement decisions. That creates frustration because the employee knows what needs to be done and how to do it—but he or she can't get it done.

It is up to you, as the manager, to make clear to everyone involved or affected by the delegated task exactly who has the authority to do what is necessary to complete the work. Under some circumstances, you may have to direct other employees to subordinate themselves to the person assigned the task for any work associated with it. It is a good idea to check periodically to find out if anyone is getting in the way or not contributing.

Don't delegate only when you are overworked or in a crisis mode. That sends the wrong message to subordinates. It says that you only delegate only when it benefits you, not to help develop them. Delegation should benefit both you and the employee. You need to delegate tasks that develop or stretch your people's talents, skills and experience. Developing workers builds up a pool of talent for your office and for the organization.

Delegate fairly. If you have multiple people who have the capability, give each a chance. Even if you have someone in whom you may not have full confidence, you may want to give him or her a shot. Start with something small and build on it. If it reaches a point where the employee can no longer succeed, you have helped him progress some and you've learned something about his capabilities.

Another part of delegating fairly is to delegate both the pleasant and unpleasant tasks. The same goes for the challenging and the boring tasks. Spread them around. Don't give all of the unpleasant assignments to the good worker just because you know she will do a good job. After too many of the unpleasant tasks, the good worker may no longer be a good worker—she may lose her motivation or decide to leave.

Micromanaging an employee to whom you have delegated a task can also ruin the motivation. Give the person some room and flexibility to do the job. Check up periodically, of course, but don't hang over his shoulder. If you have communicated well enough what you want done, give him the chance to do it. As Theodore Roosevelt put it, "The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and self-restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they do it." Focus on the results, not necessarily the method. If it was a new and successful way to get the task accomplished, spread the word and give credit. If it wasn't good, use it as a discussion point and a learning experience.

### **It's About Empowerment**

Delegation is a way of empowering your people. Empowerment of employees and delegation are closely intertwined. Delegation, carried out thoughtfully and carefully, is one of those win-win-win situations. It sets everyone up for success. Delegation can do a lot for the employee, you, and the organization. Do it properly and you ease your burden, motivate your employees, and get the tasks done all at once. What could be better?

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