

Delegating Strategically



In a Nutshell

Managers with "control issues" often don't even know that they have them. When I tell them they should delegate more, they think I "just don't get it." But, I get it better than they realize because (a) I'm a third party who can be more objective about their relationships with their staff members, and (b) I am also learning to give up control in order to be more effective. I've made progress, but I still need to improve my delegation skills.

What level are you at in terms of your delegation skills?

- *Oblivious to your inability to delegate*
- *Aware that you need to delegate more, but still need to develop your skills*
- *Very effective at getting your staff fully engaged in helping you achieve goals*

Delegating effectively is very difficult, and few managers excel at it. However, the ones who do are able to reduce their workload and provide opportunities for growth and challenge for their subordinates. Given the importance of effective time management and employee development to managerial success, delegation is something that managers should do strategically--i.e., with forethought and planning.

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What Delegation Is

"Delegation" has many definitions and connotations. In this context, delegation means more than simply giving assignments to others. It means giving another party a certain degree of discretion that's not inherent in their role--the right to make decisions that are officially tied to your role and for which you are ultimately responsible. Many organizations, as a part of their "employee empowerment programs," delegate quite a bit of decision making authority to their employees in order to promote employee spontaneity for the sake of customer service, quality or innovation.

"Delegating strategically" means delegating with forethought and planning in a way that capitalizes on opportunities. Not all managers who delegate strategically draw up plans for developing their staff, but that's an option. Management is so complex that managers don't have time for formal strategic planning of everything they do that has a strategic impact. Sometimes "being strategic" means thinking through the consequences of choices to get the best results for a given situation even if there isn't any kind of structured analysis. However,

periodically jotting down plans for delegating work to staff members with progressive levels of responsibility can be worth the time invested over the long run.

The Benefits of Delegation

There are countless benefits to delegation. The most obvious might be lightening your workload. Delegating allows you to cross items off your "to do" list and put them on someone else's. As important as that is, it might be the least powerful of the benefits of delegation. Delegation should provide challenge for your subordinates and encourage them to develop their capabilities. As they take on tasks that exceed their basic job description, they will naturally develop new knowledge and skills to cope with those tasks. Such development prepares them for future assignments and promotions. Delegation can also be a clear sign that you respect your subordinates' abilities and that you trust their discretion. Employees who feel that they are trusted and respected tend to have a higher level of commitment to their work, their organization, and especially their manager. In addition, effective delegation requires subordinates' input during the delegation process. When subordinates participate in making decisions that pertain to their work, they tend to have a greater sense of ownership of the work and increased commitment to its successful completion. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, delegation often improves responsiveness to customers. The people who have the most contact with customers--whether they are external customers or internal customers--are usually the ones with the most complete information about how best to serve them. Hence, delegation can help empower subordinates to take action to improve customer satisfaction.

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How to Delegate Effectively

Have a plan. Think about your employees' level of development and how much responsibility they're ready for. Delegate work to them over time in such a way as to continually develop their competence. You can discuss these plans with your employees. They'll appreciate your concern for their development.

Define objectives and standards. Effective delegation requires clear articulation of the objectives for the task being delegated and the standards for the work. Ideally, a manager will go beyond describing objectives and standards for each task and will convey a broader vision of what he or she is attempting to accomplish over the long run. With a clear sense of what is to be accomplished, subordinates are better able to be creative and resourceful to identify ways to complete the tasks delegated to them. Subordinates with a keen sense of their manager's vision are even more empowered to innovate and strive for realization of that vision.

Specify the range of discretion. Subordinates need to know what resources--including human resources--they can use to accomplish the tasks that are delegated to them and the level of initiative that is expected of them. Can subordinates assign tasks to their peers or other personnel not in their line of authority? What workspace and equipment can subordinates use? Can subordinates have a budget for the project? Can subordinates hire assistants or temporary help? These are the types of questions that should be addressed when delegating. It is also important to describe the level of initiative you expect the subordinate to take in terms of problem solving en route to task completion. You may ask subordinates to do one of the following when they encounter unexpected problems:

1. "Ask me what you should do."
2. "Recommend a solution, then I will tell you what to do."
3. "Act, and then let me know immediately what you have done."
4. "Take initiative, and report only routinely."

More experienced subordinates can often handle high levels of initiative.

Involve subordinates in the delegation process. Discuss what you're delegating and how you are delegating it with the subordinates. Ask them what types of tasks they would be comfortable taking responsibility for. Ask them whether they understand and can achieve the objectives. Identify the level of discretion they feel prepared to handle. As mentioned above, people tend to be more committed to decisions when they have participated in the decision-making processes. That commitment will be invaluable since you will be relying on them to be at least somewhat resourceful and to take initiative.

Clarify performance consequences. Make sure that subordinates understand the importance of the work that you have delegated to them and how successful performance helps you, your customers, etc. In addition, ensure that subordinates understand and value the rewards associated with their successful performance.

Rewards can include your appreciation, public accolades, additional responsibility, visibility, enhanced promotion potential, a bonus, etc.

Match responsibility and authority. A fundamental principle of work assignments is that responsibility must match authority. Power without accountability breeds abuses of power. Accountability without power is unjust and demoralizing. Ensure that subordinates will be held accountable for the work that has been delegated to them. As their manager, you retain *ultimate* responsibility for their successes and failures. But, when you grant them considerable discretion, your subordinates must receive *primary* responsibility.

Inform others that delegation has occurred. Particularly when delegation involves granting rights to allocate and consume additional resources, other parties need to know that you have delegated authority to your subordinates. If you tell one of your subordinates that she can enlist the help of one of her peers, you better also tell that to her peers. Everyone affected by a project must be informed that the project has been delegated.

When problems arise, insist that the subordinate recommend solutions. Avoid upward delegation--that is, having your subordinates turn to you to solve every problem that they encounter while performing the tasks that you delegated to them. One of the ways to avoid upward delegation is to ask that your subordinates find solutions to the problems that they bring to you. Even if their solutions are inferior to yours, the exercise of generating possible solutions encourages your subordinates to think like resourceful creative problem solvers.

Evaluate progress and results, and provide consequences. Unless you have formed a very high level of trust with a given subordinate, it is wise to plan periodic progress checks on the tasks you have assigned to them. When subordinates are off track, correct them without eliminating all of the discretion that you delegated to them. Subordinates are only empowered to the extent that they are given discretion as to how they will complete tasks. Evaluate results, and remain open to unconventional methods. Compare the results achieved to the standards for the tasks, and apply the appropriate consequences. Publicly praise their successes, or privately explain their errors.

Continue to delegate. In today's fast-paced competitive environment, work must be delegated to the lowest organizational level that has the competence to successfully perform it. Over time, consistently delegating an ever-increasing level of discretion and authority to subordinates creates an environment in which they will develop their skills and knowledge. So, a continual commitment to delegating tasks empowers and enhances the competence of the people who support you. Even when you have enough time to do the tasks yourself, delegate. Delegating only when you are too busy to do things yourself does not show your subordinates that you trust and respect them. For the same reason, delegate the pleasant and the unpleasant tasks. There are very few tasks that you should not delegate.

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The Very Short List of Things That Shouldn't Be Delegated

You say that there are just some things that you don't think should be delegated? There are a few things that managers should not delegate:

- performance feedback
- disciplinary actions
- politically sensitive tasks
- confrontations arising from interpersonal conflict

These difficult duties are part of your *exclusive* responsibility as a manager. It is abdication to make your subordinate the "fall guy." Everything else should be delegated down to the lowest organizational level that has the knowledge and skills to accept the responsibility. Of course, that's easier said than done. Many managers have to overcome their perceived barriers to delegation.

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How to Overcome the Barriers to Delegation

Many managers' attitudes and beliefs interfere with their use of effective delegation. Check those attitudes against reality.

"Delegation is abdication." Proper delegation isn't anything like abdication--it's actually hard work. Of course, dumping tasks on your subordinates without a systematic approach to fostering their success and skill development is abdication. However, there are so many legitimate business [reasons to delegate](#).

"Delegating would mean giving up power and control." Not when done properly. Effective delegation involves retaining control over the work output--only decisions about processes can be totally turned over to subordinates. Furthermore, by delegating managers leverage their subordinates' efforts to become more productive and influential themselves. In addition, delegating frees up time that you can use to pursue innovative projects. If you can't think of several innovative projects that you could pursue with some free time, then a lack of creativity is your problem, not delegating.

"Delegating makes me nonessential." Do you fear that your subordinates are "gaining on you"? Do you think the best way to deal with that fear is to hold them back? If so, see a therapist, because that's a recipe for failure due to paranoia. Your subordinates and your firm appreciate a manager who can develop and empower subordinates. Again, delegating frees up time that you can use to pursue innovative projects that make you valuable to your organization.

"Delegating is not worth the time--I can do the job myself faster and better." That's shortsighted. If you don't delegate tasks because you want to save time in the short run, there's likely to be a time in the future when you are overloaded with work and don't have a staff that's prepared to help you.

"I can't count on my staff to handle this." If you're not giving them the chance, how would you know? If you delegate incrementally and continually, your staff will acquire the necessary capabilities. Let them learn from their mistakes like you did when you first learned how to perform the task. If your subordinates are not driven to continually learn new skills and information, you need to counsel them. If they are motivated to learn, coach them.

In Summary ...

Strategic delegation takes time, and for many of us it requires overcoming our personal barriers to delegating. However, it's well worth the effort. By delegating effectively, you get your staff engaged in important and challenging work, you allow them to develop their skills and prepare for the next level of responsibility, and clear your schedule so that you can work on innovative projects.

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Sources and Additional References

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About the Newsletter and Subscriptions

LeaderLetter is written by Dr. Scott Williams, Department of Management, [Raj Sooin College of Business](#), Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio. It is a supplement to my MBA 751 - Managing People in Organizations class. It is intended to reinforce the course concepts and maintain communication among my former MBA 751 students, but anyone is welcome to subscribe. In addition, subscribers are welcome to forward this newsletter to anyone who they believe would have an interest in it. To [subscribe](#), simply send an e-mail message to me requesting subscription. Of course, subscriptions to the newsletter are free. To [unsubscribe](#), e-mail a reply indicating that you would like to unsubscribe.

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Whether you are one of my former students or not, I invite you to share any insights or concerns you have regarding the topic of this newsletter or any other topic relating to management skills. Please [e-mail](#) them to me. Our interactions have been invaluable. **Every week, I learn something new from *LeaderLetter* subscribers!** Let's keep the conversation going.

A Good, Clean Joke

An 80 year old man was having his annual checkup and the doctor asked him how he was feeling. "I've never been better!" he boasted. "I've got an eighteen-year-old bride who's pregnant and having my child! What do you think about that?"

The doctor considered this for a moment, then said, "Let me tell you a story. I knew a guy who was an avid hunter. He never missed a season. But one day went out in a bit of a hurry and he accidentally grabbed his umbrella instead of his gun. So he was in the woods and suddenly a grizzly bear appeared in front of him! He raised up his umbrella, pointed it at the bear and squeezed the handle. And do you know what happened?"

Dumbfounded, the old man replied, "No."

The doctor finished, "A loud 'bang' rang out, and the bear dropped dead in front of him!"

"That's impossible!" exclaimed the old man. "Someone else must have shot that bear."

"That's kind of what I'm getting at..." replied the doctor.

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