

# *The Art of Delegation*

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It has been said that effective management is the art of getting things done through other people. Effective delegation, therefore, is an essential managerial skill.

Delegation involves entrusting another person with a task for which the delegator (you) remains ultimately responsible. But, to achieve the best results, you must be aware of its benefits and recognize the barriers that can hinder its success.

## **Delegate Or Suffocate!**

If you could get everything done yourself, there would be no need for staff. If you cannot do everything yourself, you need to be able to delegate. If delegation is needed, then someone must manage the assignments.

Management is delegation. As leaders we need to either learn to do it well or we will be buried in work that others should, and could, be doing. Management's responsibility is the delegation of tasks to others and the control of outcomes.

The more people you can put to effective use, the greater your success. Your ability to work through other people is directly proportional to professional success. Managers must learn to delegate assignments and ensure that they are completed correctly, on time, and within budget.

## **Delegation Dilemma**

Well, that all sounds really good, doesn't it? The question then is; why do some managers fail to delegate effectively?

As a manager, you must be secure enough in your position, abilities, and management support to delegate. If these do not exist, then delegation is difficult to accomplish. Some managers and leaders do not delegate because they think they can do it faster and better themselves, or they don't want to overburden the staff. Some project managers simply don't know how to delegate because of the following fears:

- Loss of control
- Lack of time
- Lack of trust
- No confidence in team members

With seniority comes increasing levels of supervision. Job descriptions change from doing to getting things done; from responsibility to accountability.

At very senior levels, your entire day is spent making sure that delegated tasks are being completed properly. Getting others to do things, and do them well, is the job of a senior executive. Managers should usually retain the following tasks:

- Leadership
- Rewards
- Control
- Personnel
- Key customers
- Strategy
- Communication

### **When to Delegate?**

Determine when to delegate by asking yourself the following questions:

- Does the team member have the necessary skill or information?
- Is the commitment of team members critical to successful implementation?
- Will delegation of this task enhance the delegate's abilities and personal development?
- Does sufficient time exist to delegate effectively?

Delegation should never be considered when there is a high probability that the person will not be able to successfully complete the task. It is okay to let them expand their abilities, but not to the point that failure causes the employee to professionally self-destruct.

### **The Process of Delegation**

Not only is delegating essential, it makes everyone happier. The key to successful delegation is having good staff. That is, staff that accepts assignments easily. These are people who are self-motivated problem-solvers who get things done on time and with little or no supervision. Good people are hard to find, because no one ever loses them once they have been identified. If you want to have good people, you need to create and hold them.

One main component of motivation is handing out responsibility, authority, and autonomy. Properly done, delegation will provide staff with the experience they need to develop their careers. It will also give employees both job satisfaction and challenge. Delegating works for everyone.

## **It Starts With Planning**

Effective delegation starts with putting a system in place. Develop a structure and follow it. For complex projects involving several people, draw up plans. Work with the people involved to come to a consensus on those things for which each person is responsible. Post the plan and refer to it often. Part of delegating is answering questions, so make yourself available. Do not let uncertainties linger. At its most basic level, delegating is a six-step process:

### **Step 1: Analyze the task.**

- What is the situation now, and how will completing the task change it
- Divide the work load into tasks that are suitable to be assigned, preferably to individuals rather than a group.
- Determine the budget and resources needed?
- Set a specific measurable goal that shows success.

### **Step 2: Select a delegate.**

- Identify the knowledge and skills that are needed.
- Match requirements with the best candidate. Staff must be chosen based on their skills, experience, and availability.
- Is training needed?
- Is support needed?
- Check points to make corrections.
- Avoid micromanaging.

### **Step 3: Pass the baton but not the buck.**

- Describe the goal of the task and why the candidate was selected.
- Prepare a brief that provides a clear record and set of instructions for the assigned task.
- Be specific about responsibility and authority.
- Discuss workload and agree on a reporting structure.

### **Step 4: Take the delegate's perspective.**

- Does the task have a well-defined goal?
- How will it affect workload?
- Is training or support needed?
- Are there inherent risks?

### **Step 5: Execute the task.**

- Share the delegate's level of authority with others.
- The delegator needs to stay informed.
- Progress must be monitored and controlled so that if something is going wrong it can be corrected early.

### **Step 6: Conduct regular feedback sessions.**

- The end result is judged.
- Both parties might share credit or blame. If everything went well, everyone should be praised. If there were problems, what were they? How will they be prevented in the future?
- Whether things went well or not, keep a record to help management keep track of what was done, by whom, and how well.

### **It Continues With Monitoring**

The degree of monitoring, feedback, and control that is required to manage delegated tasks depends on your comfort-level with the person's given responsibilities. You can always maintain a level of oversight and control, but you must not look over the shoulder of the person the task has been delegated to.

The general rule is to start with hands-on control (close monitoring) and quickly move to hands-off. Impose as few controls as possible, but check back frequently. Give guidance and instruction, and then give your employees the benefit of the doubt. Encourage initiative in others by showing that you trust their judgment. Make sure they have the information and resources they need to be successful. In time, they can be expected to ask for what they require, but new delegates need to learn when and how to do so.

A subtle, but effective, form of monitoring is the use of milestones. Create a series of small, interim deliverables that serve as checks and balances on the progress of a larger task.

When monitoring effort, it is good to be aware of the variations in working styles among staff:

- In the perfect world, a task would be undertaken as soon as it was assigned (optimum curve). There would be a rapid rise in effort, and then it would level off and remain fairly even throughout the majority of the execution phase. As a manager, this is how you would like people to behave.

- Most tasks are started late. The average person will not really get going for a while and, in order to complete on time, will need to provide an extra effort near completion time. Good employees will still get things done on time. As a manager, this type of work habit can cause some discomfort because of the late start.
- Then there is the procrastinator. This person begins so late that an enormous effort is required in order to finish on time. Good employees will still get tasks done on time, but there may be sleepless nights in the process. The student syndrome is the worst-case scenario of procrastination: these people start so late that it is virtually impossible for them to complete on time, despite heroic last-minute efforts.

The way someone approaches tasks (their working style) is very hard, if not impossible, to change. You must learn to work with each individual's style. For instance, you can either wait and hope a procrastinator delivers on time, or impose tight controls and monitoring regimes. Either of these options is a lot of work. The alternative, and best technique, is to introduce more frequent, smaller tasks that serve as milestones. A procrastinator may start late on each one, but none of the delays will be critical.

## **In Summary**

The following are a few general common sense rules to keep in mind regarding delegating:

- Your ability to work through other people is directly proportional to professional success.
- When you delegate, you are not delegating the right to perform an action, you are delegating the right to make decisions.
- First, you must persuade yourself to delegate. You will not benefit if you assume that it will take longer to teach a person how to do the task than it will take for you to do it yourself.
- Make sure the person accepting the task clearly understands what is to be done. Make sure to offer support and feedback.
- Check on the task and provide positive feedback. Ensure that your feedback is helpful and not interfering.
- If you cannot trust someone to do a job well, then you cannot delegate tasks to them. Either work to develop trust, by helping that person develop their skills, or do not retain the person. If you cannot delegate effectively to someone, then they are a drain on resources, not an addition to them.
- Do not try to over-manage. Give delegates space. Micromanaging, watching what everyone does all the time, discourages initiative. You might as well do it yourself, if you cannot back off and let the delegate work.
- Delegation works best in an open environment. Let delegates know they can, and should, ask questions. Delegation is all about communication.

## **References**

Material for this article was compiled from Global Knowledge courses Business Skills for IT Professionals (2805), Management and Leadership Skills for New Managers (2820), and People Skills for Project Managers (2824).

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