The Art of Delegation

An alarming number of leaders suffer from the sensation that each day they are losing ground, unable to stay in front of the wave of overburdening workloads, deadlines, and expectations. The toll on productivity, morale, and health often goes unrecognized until a crisis hits.

Equally alarming is that in some cases it is self-induced. Many leaders take on assignments, unnecessarily retain work, or fail to delegate when the opportunities exist. They forego vacations or real, and necessary, time off. Granted, in this do-more-with-less culture, leaders may have fewer resources, but overworked managers often fail to understand what true delegation is and are unable to delegate even when they do.

Leaders who don't delegate suffer from an inability to manage, as desperation becomes the norm. The added stress and anxiety flows from the leader's desk to the staff, and sets the entire organization on edge. Conditions around the team worsen as attitudes, engagement, efficiency, and profitability degrade.

Many leaders view delegation as a sign of weakness, an inability to handle the job, or something done out of desperation. However, delegation is a strategic tool used by wise leaders to make the most of available manpower to clear tough obstacles. Learning to delegate offers leaders relief and equips them to manage at their best, which is ultimately best for everyone.

Categorize Work to Delegate

If piles of work are spilling over on your desk, your last thought might be how to redistribute some of the work, but this is exactly the thing to do. Do it while you still have some clarity of mind and grasp of the projects at hand. Skillful delegation builds team unity and accountability, as people pull together to achieve a goal and help each other get better.

A Message from Nancy...

Let me ask you:

- Are the people on your team engaged and committed or just collecting a pay check?

- Do you have the right people in the right seats on the bus? Are *you* in the right seat?

- Is the high cost of turnover eating away your organization's bottom-line?

- Are your processes and procedures (or lack thereof) delivering productive and efficient results?

- How comfortable are the members of your senior team managing and leading others?

In today's highly competitive environment, it's no surprise that "*what got you here may not get you there.*"

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The baffling issue may be where to begin. The pile of work looks overwhelming. The first step is to categorize and separate it into two groups: one that cannot be delegated and another that can. As a leader, you certainly have assignments or tasks that must be handled at your level with your experience, connections or authority.

However, many leaders are surprised by the amount of work on their desk that can be accomplished by others. Some of it may be busywork, manual-type of work, revising work that has already been done or tasks that can be done with the experience and skills of a staff member. This is the group of tasks that are candidates for delegation. Will it take a sizeable investment of your time to sort through your piles to make these determinations? Of course, but you will find the investment well worth making.

Workload priorities must also be taken into account. As Jayson DeMers, CEO of AudienceBloom writes in an article for Inc.com, develop a priority system for tasks. What is essential and what can wait? Delegating hotter projects may give you enough time to catch your breath and resume a more normal routine sooner than you think. Another tactic is delegating simpler, quick work and allow yourself to tackle the more complex with better focus.

Seasonal businesses offer experienced leaders some predictability to periods of higher expected workload, so it pays to make other staff members available for delegated tasks based on a calendar. Plan for those before the rush hits.

Release Control

Some leaders misunderstand the nature of delegation. They believe they can wash their hands of responsibilities when staff members are handed assignments that were originally on the leader's desk. The employee is now on their own to deal with the outcome, whether favorable or unfavorable. This abdication is not what delegation is about.

An organization still holds the leader responsible, regardless of whose hands actually performed the work. Leaders who try to dodge responsibility by pitching work to others soon experience a myriad of negative consequences, including distrust and disloyalty from their people.

Most delegation hesitancy lands on the other side of the control spectrum, where leaders are not willing to let go of control. As Jesse Sostrin, PhD, describes in HBR, overextension fuels an instinctive reaction to "protect" work. Leaders who keep the workload to

themselves often believe that somehow the delegation of work reduces their importance, or at least how superiors perceive it.

Ironically, delegating work puts a leader's control into action with decision-making, task coordination, and goal achievement. The more that work is reserved for leaders, the less of it actually gets done. This doesn't reflect well on a leader's state of control. Leaders who can be helped to see this are more able to break their control-clutching behavior.

Another control-related reason leaders choose not to delegate is the perceived time and effort needed to train an employee or bring them up to speed. It seems too inconvenient or too remedial for someone at their level to do, and it feels too much like a sacrifice of control. Leaders who can deemphasize their sense of control and turn their attention to solving problems resist delegating less.

Practice Trust

When a leader delegates a task, they face a risk of the assignment not getting done exactly the way they expect. This frightens some managers into thinking the employee's results won't meet their personal criteria, and the simple way for this to be avoided is not to delegate.

Bordering on the control theme, this concern stems from a leader's lack of trust in the employee's abilities. Leaders who doubt anyone can perform a specific task as well as they can severely limit what their team can accomplish. A leadership coach can help mitigate this mindset with one that empowers employees to prove themselves.

If the employee's skills aren't fully understood, the leader must be the one to correct this. Fortunately, this is relatively simple to address. If it is a matter of the leader not believing in a specific employee, they may find delegating easier if they use a process of monitoring the employee's progress.

However, monitoring doesn't mean smothering or micromanaging someone. People need the freedom to work and use their skills, and are benefitted by leaders who only occasionally verify how they're doing. Periodically inquiring about their progress is a fair tradeoff for debilitating, pestering distrust.

Keeping knowledge to oneself is not the job-security anchor many seem to think it is. Knowledge is not power, rather, power is the ability to harness the collective knowledge of the staff. Leaders succeed by teaching and trusting people and allowing them to contribute in ways they couldn't before. Encourage

growth and suggest ways to make improvements.

Begin with "Why"

Employees are much more likely to complete delegated tasks and assignments when they have a clear understanding of what, how, and most importantly, why: why you are assigning the task to them. Why do you need to delegate this task or assignment? Why are you choosing them?

While it is important to provide context so the employee understands how the assignment fits into the overall success of the organization, lines of business, departments, and teams, two-way conversation regarding the employee's strengths and personal career development are critical for successful delegation. Share your understanding of the employee: their strengths, goals, and needs.

Be sure to use language that focuses on the employee's success:

- **Empower your employee** by providing information regarding resources, including other key personnel and their responsibility (and authority) and how you will support and assist your employee with the new assignment.

- **Establish and discuss** a clear execution plan, including critical deliverables, benchmarks, waypoints, and status updates. Ask what their level of comfort is with the task or project assignment, what approach they would take, and how you can best support them.

- **Verify** you are both in agreement about expectations. If your employee lacks the experience or confidence to engage in the assignment, consider ways your employee can shadow you or someone else for future assignments.

- **Share changes** in assignment, responsibility, and authority with team members and others as appropriate.

Follow-Up with Feedback

A critical aspect of delegating is what occurs after the task is finished. This is the delegation follow-up stage, which includes reflection, analysis, and feedback.

During and after the project assignment is complete, your employee should make notes on insights and lessons learned. Questions might include:

- What went as expected?

- What didn't?

- Why?

- How were issues resolved?

- How could the process be improved in the future?

Employees who meet expectations deserve appropriate praise for their success.

When expectations are not met, a constructive feedback process is necessary. This is a considerate discussion on the improvements needed, while pointing out the positive things that took place. Leaders who can give and receive instructive feedback while expressing consideration and thanks earn trust from employees and guide them to improvement.

Nothing causes your people to dread delegation more than an unfortunate response from you. When they dread it, the result of their work suffers accordingly. This in turn causes you to dread it, and the cycle spirals down.

As an expression of humility and openness, ask your people for their feedback on your delegation methods. For example:

- How can you improve your delegation style?

- What other tasks or assignments would the employee like to pursue?

This dialogue helps to improve the delegation relationship and make you a better leader. Keep in mind that delegating tasks can (and should) expand beyond the routine: sharing fun tasks and assignments provides opportunities to strengthen and develop others. Similarly, delegating tasks that others can do better strengthens teams and organizations.

The goal is to have a staff that welcomes delegated tasks so they can be better contributors. Many leaders find this to be the most freeing way to be better delegators; when the process yields two-way success the organization is better suited to manage high workload situations. Make delegation a welcomed tool in your arsenal and raise the level of production for you and your staff.

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