

The Art of Delegation

Expert knowledge means success



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Note: This publication has not been updated since it was last published. Some of the hyperlinks may have changed and may need updating. In addition, some of the information in this publication may be out of date.

Introduction

Delegation is the assignment of tasks, responsibilities and authority to others while retaining overall accountability. Delegation isn't just telling someone what to do. Your "delegates" must be able to act fully in your absence - it means letting them think and decide for themselves but it isn't abdication if you get regular feedback on results.

Delegation is a skill most managers have heard about but which few properly understand and apply. The main problem is that managers are slow to delegate because they fear that no one will do the job properly, or as well as they could do it themselves.

All too often managers delegate the "wrong" things. They usually have no interest in what they delegate and thereby lose control over the process or function that they are accountable for. If the manager is truly accountable for the outcome of other people's activities, then obviously proper care must be taken in how, what and why activities, projects, processes, or functions are assigned or delegated to others.

In a 1993 article in *HResource*, a publication of Talent Tree Personnel Services, the following items were listed as being tasks that could be delegated to others to make a manager's lot easier:

1. Matters that keep repeating themselves.
2. Minor decisions most frequently made.
3. Details that take the biggest chunks of time.
4. Parts of the job that the supervisor is least qualified to handle.
5. Job details that the superior most dislikes.
6. Parts of the job that make the superior over-specialised.
7. Parts of the job that make the superior under-specialised.

"Delegation is a vital management skill, but some managers don't delegate effectively, often out of fear of letting go. They hold the mistaken belief that nobody else can do the job as well as they can. Others feel they simply haven't got the time to delegate an activity and that it's easier to do the job themselves. The key is to make sure that you delegate, but don't abdicate on the one hand or interfere on the other."

Source: *The Institute of Management Foundation*

Common symptoms of a problem with delegating include:

- "I can do it better"
- "It's quicker to do it myself"
- "No one else has my experience or competence"
- "I like to keep these projects for myself - I like to keep in touch"
- "It takes too long to teach or show someone else, so it's easier to do it myself"
- "My desk is never clear and I frequently take work home"
- "I'm frightened that I will lose control and someone will take on my job"
- "I just didn't think about delegating"

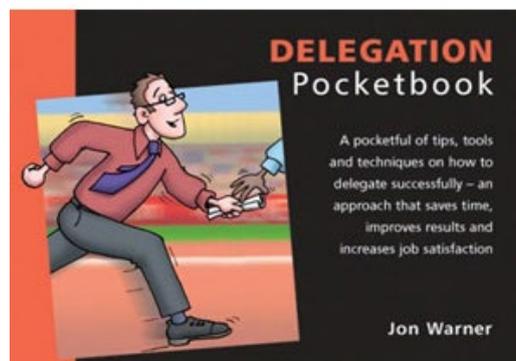
What is Delegation?

Delegation is primarily about entrusting your authority to others, enabling them to act and initiate independently and to assume responsibility with you for specific tasks - but if something goes wrong, you remain accountable since you are the manager.

The idea behind delegation is that managers can gain more time to do complex tasks yet keep an overview of the project - and as a result develop themselves and their team. The objective is to get the job done by someone else - not just the simple tasks of reading or following instructions, but also the decision-making and changes, which depend upon new information as it arises.

To enable someone else to do the job for you, you must ensure that:

- you communicate clearly so that they know exactly what you want of them
- they have the authority to achieve it
- they know how to do it



Delegation Pocketbook by Jon Warner (author) and Phil Hailstone (illustrator), published by Management Pocketbooks (ISBN-10: 1903776910) is a useful resource on the art of delegation

Successful Delegation

There are several components to successful delegation:

- **Define the task**

Confirm in your own mind that the task is suitable to be delegated.

- **Give the job to someone who can get it done**

What are your reasons for delegating to this person? What are you and they going to get out of it? This doesn't mean that person has all the skills for execution, but that they're able to marshal the right resources. Sometimes the first step in the project will be education - training or coaching may be required.

- **Assess ability and training needs**

Is the other person capable of doing the task? Do they understand what needs to be done? If they don't understand, then you can't delegate.

- **Communicate and explain**

The things that must be spelled out clearly are timescales, outcomes, budget constraints and so on. Anything less creates conditions for failure. You must explain the reasons why the job or responsibility is being delegated, why it's being delegated to that person, its importance and relevance to the organisation.

- **State the required results**

What has to be achieved? Clarify understanding by getting feedback from the other person. Make sure they know how you intend to measure whether the job is being done successfully. Failing to agree on methods of checking and controlling in advance will cause your monitoring to seem like interference or lack of trust.

- **Consider resources required**

Discuss and agree what's required to get the job done. Consider factors such as people, location, premises, equipment, money, materials, and other related activities and services.

- **Agree a plan of action**

Depending on the complexity of the project, the first step may be creation of a plan. The plan should include resources (see above), approach or methodology, timeline, measures and milestones. Even simple projects require a plan.

- **Set up a structure for accountability**

For example, if the project is to take place over the next 12 weeks, then schedule an interim meeting in say three weeks time. Perhaps you should establish a weekly conference call, or an e-mailed status report. The idea is to create a means by which you

can jointly evaluate progress and make corrections as required. This helps keep the project, and the people, on track.

- **Agree deadlines**

When must the job be finished, when are the review dates, when are the reports due? And if the task is complex and has parts or stages, what are the priorities?

- **Support and communicate**

Here you will need to think about whom else in the organisation needs to know what's going on and inform them. By involving the other person in considering this, they can see beyond the issue at hand.

- **Get commitment**

Often, time frames are dictated by external circumstances. Still, your delegate must sign on for the task at hand. If you say, *"This must be done by next Tuesday,"* they have to agree that it is possible. Ask instead. *"Can you have this by Tuesday?"* To you this may seem a bit remedial, but the step is often overlooked. Whenever possible, have your delegate set the timeline and create the plan. You need only provide guidance and sign off. As General Patton said, *"Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity."*

- **Provide timely feedback**

With successful delegation, it's crucial to let the person know how they are doing, and whether they have achieved their aims. If not, you must review with them why things didn't go to plan, and deal with the problems.

To do the above, a good manager delegates successfully when he/she:

- Encourages participation
- Reviews results - not methods
- Shows trust
- Seeks recommendations
- Delegates credit - not blame
- Gives support
- Is consistent

These all depend upon communicating clearly the nature of the task, the extent of their discretion, and the sources of relevant information and knowledge. It's also important that delegated tasks are seen as meaningful, challenging assignments and that the process of delegation isn't another way of describing the dumping on other of unwanted or distasteful tasks.

The Various Stages of Delegation

Stage	Nature of delegation	Outcome
1	<i>"Wait to be told"; or "Do exactly what I say" "Look into the situation for me"; "Get all the facts and report them to me. I'll then decide what to do"</i>	The employee is new to the job or can't be trusted fully and the supervisor wants to retain control of the outcome. Here, there's no delegation at all.
2	<i>"Look into this and tell me what you come up with but I'll decide"; "Identify the problem"; "Look for alternative solutions"</i>	The employee is being developed and the supervisor wants to see how he or she approaches problems and makes decisions. This asks for investigation but no recommendation is sought.
3	<i>"Tell me your recommendation, and the other options with the pros and cons of each but I'll let you know whether you can go ahead"</i>	This asks for analysis and recommendation, but you will check the thinking before making a decision.
4	<i>"Examine the issues and let me know what you intend to do, but don't go ahead until you check with me".</i>	The supervisor has confidence in the employee who is trusted to judge the relative options. No action can be taken without the supervisor's approval.
5	<i>"Solve the problem and let me know what you intend to do, then do it, unless I say you shouldn't".</i>	The supervisor has respect for the employee's ability and judgement, and only wants a final check before action is taken. Now the other person begins to control the action. The subtle increase in responsibility saves time.
6	<i>Take action on this matter and let me know what you did."</i>	The supervisor has full confidence in the employee and has no need to be asked or consulted with before action is taken. He or she only wants to know the outcome.
7	<i>"Take whatever action you think is necessary - you needn't check back with me."</i>	The supervisor has total confidence in the employee who has full authority to act and does not need to report the results back to the supervisor. This is the most freedom that we can give to another person. It's the ultimate objective of successful delegation.

Delegation Doesn't Always Work

As most managers will have found out, delegation doesn't always end up with the desired result. When delegation fails it can usually be attributed to one of three reasons. Each reason seems obvious, but all managers should examine their own process of delegation and evaluate its effectiveness. If it doesn't seem to be working, is it due to:

- ***The process is incomplete***

What's gone wrong here is that the responsibilities for results have been distributed without granting sufficient authority or creating a relationship of accountability.

- ***The supervisor refuses (consciously or unconsciously) to delegate***

The obstacles to delegation are never overcome by the supervisor or the subordinate.

- ***Delegation is blocked by incomplete or ineffective communication***

Often, the supervisor goes through the process and activities associated with delegation without the people realising that delegation had been attempted. Here, the supervisor acts and proceeds as if delegation has taken place, with the subordinate only finding out when deadlines approach. This is the most difficult reason to identify and can be eliminated by clarity at any early stage as to what is expected.

Recommended Reading

- Essential Delegation Skills, by Carla L. Brown, published by Gower Publishing Limited; ISBN: 0566079445.
- Delegation, by Andrew Forrest, published by Industrial Society; ISBN: 1858359538.



- Effective Delegation, by Chris Roebuck, published by AMACOM; ISBN: 081447019X.
- How to Be Better at Delegation and Coaching, by Tony Atherton, published by Kogan Page; ISBN: 0749429445.
- Making Delegation Happen, by Robert Burns, published by Business & Professional Publishing; ISBN: 1875889426.
- You Can't Do It All: Effective Delegation for Supervisors (How-To Do Book Series), by Jeanne Baer, Karen M. Miller (Editor), published by American Media Publishing; ISBN: 1884926991.
- Essential Managers: How To Delegate by Robert Heller, Tim Hindle, published by DK Pub Merchandise; ISBN: 0789428903.
- Delegation Skills, by Bruce B. Tepper, published by McGraw-Hill Professional Publishing; ISBN: 0786301481.

Further Information

This guide is for general interest - it is always essential to take advice on specific issues. We believe that the facts are correct as at the date of publication, but there may be certain errors and omissions for which we cannot be responsible.

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