

Delegation 101

Mastering the art and skill of delegation is desirable for a leader at any level in an organization. As a skill, delegation requires a leader's attention, effort, and discipline to achieve desired results through the work of others. Delegation as an art requires more sophisticated EQ and the ability to know when to attend to the people side of the equation with just the right amount of attention or 'leadership touch.'

Delegation is not merely the handing over or abdication of a task to another, without effort or follow-up. As an intransitive verb, the Merriam Webster definition of delegate is "to assign responsibility or authority." This is not to be confused with abdication, which Merriam defines as "to cast off, or to relinquish formally," or in the intransitive form, "to renounce a function."

If you haven't delegated regularly, or if you need a refresher, or if you are wondering what you should be asking yourself to get started, consider these questions:

1. **What should I delegate?** Knowing what task or job function to delegate and in what order to delegate will be different for every supervisor, manager and executive. Some questions to ask when determining what to delegate include: *What do you do that takes the most time and provides the least perceived value? What is not getting done that needs to get done? What do you do that someone else could easily learn to do? What do you do that someone else could do better? What is the natural order of the process or the work being done?* Start with an early step, and then provide training for subsequent steps. If the early step is complex, start with a simple step, and then build blocks of training that logically follow.

2. **How will I train the delegee?** Consider the level of knowledge, skills, and abilities of the delegee. Consider the sophistication and type of task or job function to be delegated – is it simple and quick to accomplish, complex and time-consuming, interface with a system or machine, interface with one or more people, similar to current job duties, new and different from current job duties, etc. Consider using a three-step training approach as many people learn by watching, interacting, and then performing a task. **Step 1:** Demonstrate how to do the task. During this ‘job shadowing’ phase, the delegee should ask questions and take notes and you should ask questions that confirm their understanding. If written documentation doesn’t yet exist, consider asking the delegee to author a process or procedure document as an artifact of training. **Step 2:** Have the delegee handle the task with you or a proxy present and available to answer questions and provide feedback. **Step 3:** Have the delegee handle the task without providing a ‘safety net of support.’ Follow up closely to assure the integrity and quality of task execution, to ask questions, and to provide feedback. Affirmative feedback is very valuable to a learner at this step. While it may appear inefficient to pay two or more people to handle one task or one job for a short period, remember that not all skills can be effectively transferred by reading a procedure manual or watching a training video.
3. **How can I gain assurance that delegated tasks or delegated work is getting done, and that it’s being done correctly?** Feeling uneasy when someone else is doing work for you or doing work that you used to do is normal. Being able to relax into the situation often comes with the knowledge that the work is being done, that it is being done timely and that it is being done well (to your standards). This means that you need to decide where to build in accountability and feedback. Determine the critical points in the task or process where you can observe, see or otherwise gain proof of success, of completion, or creation of the desired artifact (e.g., monthly departmental report), and schedule accountability checkpoints. You may initially decide that several checkpoints are needed,

and then reduce the number of checkpoints as mastery is demonstrated by the delegee. It is advisable to host a 'quality' or 'performance' discussion after the process is complete or the creation is made or the artifact is produced. This is a time for you to ask a few meaningful questions that probe into the task or process so you have assurance that the outcome is accurate, relevant, understood by you, and explainable to others. The challenge here is to have as few checkpoints as possible that provide sufficient assurance that the work is being done well.

“Delegating work works, provided the one delegating works, too.”

- Robert Half

Large Projects: With large projects, identify the objectives and determine the goals, then have the team figure out how to best meet goals. Decide which direction to take, then create a timeline of milestones, assign clear responsibility, and track the milestones. During checkpoints, remember to ask questions about leading and lagging indicators, and interdependencies. A general rule of thumb is to spend more time reviewing expectations in the beginning of the project so that the team spends less time fixing problems later.

*“Great things in business are never done by one person,
they’re done by a team of people.”*

-Steve Jobs

Expectations: It is important that team members are aware of your expectations. Each person should know the top two or three areas to focus on. Be explicit in telling people how much time you expect them to devote to a given task. For example, should an unplanned presentation take 2 hours or 2 days to prepare? Help subordinates understand the quality of work you are expecting – should they prepare a few notes or a formal report, a high-level plan, or a detailed, working draft – should they work over the weekend, or leave it for

Monday? Describe the outcome you want to achieve (in sufficient detail) rather than dictate how the task should be accomplished.

*"Don't tell people how to do things,
tell them what to do and let them surprise you with their results."
- George S. Patton*

Celebrate Team Wins: People like to work for those who show genuine appreciation for them and for their work. It's especially important to acknowledge and celebrate team wins as only a team can accomplish what individuals could not do separately, or individually. Without being prompted to pause for acknowledgement and celebration, team members can start to feel unseen, undervalued and unappreciated. There is always more work to do; there aren't always wins to celebrate. When wins happen, celebrate them – and celebrate the people who helped create them. Consider offering recognition in the form of written or verbal words of appreciation and acknowledgement, tokens of appreciation (e.g., inscribed token, gift card), time away for a group meal, outing, or event), a formal organizational acknowledgement, or a more creative recognition in line with company culture.

*"Celebrate what you've accomplished,
and raise the bar a little higher each time you succeed."
- Mia Hamm*