

The Power of Delegation: Freeing the Manager, Empowering the Employee!

“No one can do everything, but everyone can do something!” – Unknown

For those of you who have employed delegation throughout your career and have appreciated all the rewards for you and your team, you know how valuable delegating a leadership and productivity tool is. But still, there still many managers and supervisors who toil daily under heavy workloads and under the impression that they alone can do everything and have yet to discover the might and majesty of effective delegation.

A few years ago, I had just finished a leadership workshop for a group of managers, directors, and supervisors for a particular municipality when a young woman approached me and asked me if she could have a few moments of my time. She related that she had been a supervisor for about a year and a half and admitted she was really struggling in her role. Furthermore, she was becoming burned out, often arriving early, and staying late – five days a week. So, through some simple questions, her current world was a direct result of having a heavy workload and stressful workflow. That’s when I mentioned the role of delegation and if she was delegating to her team. She admitted that she wasn’t delegating and that she a) wasn’t sure how to and b) was worried that her team might not respond well to her requests and c) that they might not be able to accomplish the delegate tasks to her and the organization’s expectations.

I introduced her to a quick plan of action on initiating delegation, offering some quick pointers on how to start, how to effectively instruct and demonstrate her wishes, and how and when to follow-up. She returned to her team, looked for when and where she could delegate, and then chose her moment and selected her employees. And like so many of us who have implemented delegation as part of our day-to-day approach to leading our people, she discovered that a) it actually worked b) created more time for her to focus on her own responsibilities, and c) regained more control over her own schedule. Within a few short weeks, she started to see positive results. Most notably, she was pleased and even delighted that her team actually embraced the new tasks and responsibilities.

As I see it the true benefits of a well-executed delegation plan from a leadership perspective creates more time for the leader to lead and focus on more important and pressing matters all the while introducing your employees to new tasks and duties that build capacity and deepens capability.

So Why Delegate?

Contrary to popular belief, delegation isn’t the slow abdication of responsibility but a real opportunity to empower others and delegation is an essential leadership tool and one that should be prominent in any leader’s toolbox. Managers and supervisors discovered long ago that carefully executed delegation to their employees could prove to be a mutually beneficial experience that builds their ability to do more. And more importantly delegation and your experience with it can reveal your people’s ability to learn new things and take on new responsibilities.

The best argument for effective delegation is that it “frees” you from having to do the task or responsibility yourself and thus opens up valuable time in which you can do more important or pressing work. We are often so busy, and our days so filled up that freeing up time to do whatever you need to do or even get caught up really makes sense.

However, all too often the main reason behind the reluctance to delegate, responsibility, or task lies within the argument of efficiency and efficacy. For so many their argument is that it's just “easier and more efficient than I do the task myself and therefore I can ensure control over quality and outcomes”. It is not really a bad argument especially in an increasingly busy and complex world in which time is often at a premium and expectations placed on us are high and time-sensitive...and that a failed delegation could have disastrous outcomes. So, for delegation to succeed, you need to implement it wisely and patiently with a focus on communicating clearly and ensuring comprehension.

Furthermore, there will be times in which you might be unavailable such as being on vacation, on sick leave, or dealing with a family emergency. It is times like this when having members within your team able and ready to step in and step up that all your efforts to delegate really make sense.

At the heart of the rationale for delegation lies in having a greater vision of the purpose behind leading others. It's about being able to see a bigger picture of investing in and building your team. It is then you will appreciate the value and benefits of delegating to those around you. Strong teams are the result of leaders that made them that way.

The Psychology of Power and Control

It is a perpetuated myth that leaders become less valuable when they divest some of the responsibility of their role through delegation. That's like saying that parents are less important when they ask their children to pitch in and help around the house. I believe there is no basis in believing that if you empower others with some of your current responsibilities that it makes you any less valuable, in fact, I believe it is the opposite.

Progressive and effective leaders know that making the people they lead better skilled, more capable, and more adaptive builds teams and organizations. With new skills and abilities learned, and the confidence to take on new responsibility delegation has the power and reach to empowers employees to do more, be able to step in and step up, and to do better...and that is a very good thing for everyone concerned. Furthermore, the best leaders are always looking forward and thinking about ways to fortify their teams and departments by deepening the scope and range of abilities. A smarter and more agile team is the result of a smart, proactive leader driven by a long-term vision to improve.

Delegation will mean sharing power and control with others and that will happen a lot easier if you feel secure in your abilities to lead and their abilities to learn. The obvious reward of "letting go" is that you deepen the capacity of others to do more and be more valuable. Just like cross-training, new skills and abilities within your team provide greater flexibility and capability if and when you need it. In times of crisis or staff shortages, empowered staff becomes even more valuable is greater flexibility to re-deploy team efforts.

My final argument is simple...it can raise morale. The more someone feels that are capable of accomplishing, the greater value they have to an organization but more importantly to themselves. Thus, delegation is ultimately a path to helping those you lead to see themselves as better more capable, and confident people...and just accomplishing that has the power and potential to raise everyone up!

Effective Delegation in a Nutshell

Briefly, here is an outline of what a leader needs to know and consider when delegating. To begin, you need to have a clear and complete understanding of the depth/complexity of the task. For delegation to succeed you need to match the task or responsibility to the right person or people. You will need to take the appropriate amount of time to explain what your expectations are and the timelines inherent with the task including completion. Furthermore, effective delegation presupposes your ability to effectively communicate and, in most cases, actually to educate and demonstrate the processes with a task or responsibility.

There are three very important considerations when delegating a task or responsibility.

1). Ability to learn and retain information. As a leader, you need to match the task with the person or people and for that, you will need to know what their ability to learn and then execute what they've learned. One way to ensure that is to have them summarize their understanding of what you are asking them to do. If they are clear on how to proceed then let them do it and if not, it is an opportunity to be supportive and clarify your instructions.

2). Level of self-responsibility / Ability to work independently. Once you delegate responsibility, the person or people need to move forward confident in success, knowledgeable of what is expected, and when and to do all this responsibly. They may need to work as a team collaboratively or independently and you need to be sure of their comfort and ability to work either way.

3) Ability/desire to seek assistance when required. Leaders lead best when an environment of trust is established, and delegation is most likely to succeed when your people can feel free and comfortable to seek assistance or additional guidance. Sometimes fear of failure can get in the way as those you delegate to maybe hesitant to admit that they are struggling as they execute a task or responsibility so it is critical that a leader removes this impediment but reassuring people that they can come to you for assistance without fear of judgment or criticism.

Let me be clear, the end goal of delegation is supposed to be a positive and productive experience that benefits all concerned and **not** a baptism of fire that generates frustration and stress.

Benefits of Delegation?

Through delegating, you discover more time in your schedule, and you empower your employees to develop new skills and abilities, and they become more confident and competent as they are able to fulfill more of their potential.

Delegation has the potential to be a real litmus test for how people handle responsibilities and can be a bellwether for how they might handle greater responsibilities in the future. If you wonder what your people are really capable of or who your future leaders are, the delegation is simple yet effective proving ground.

When delegating to others, you provide them insights into your responsibilities and that can play a role in them having a greater understanding of what you do and the challenges you face. So, effective delegation has the power to break down misconceptions of the role of what leaders do from an employee's point of view.

Delegation empowers. I believe that the greatest benefit of delegation besides freeing up time for leaders lies in providing a platform for new skills and abilities in your team. Particularly, for employees that may be considering promotion. If they can handle an assigned task, project, or responsibility, competently and professionally, it might be an indicator of how they will handle greater challenges in the future.

When you make delegation a part of your leadership strategy, over a period of time, you create a culture in which shared responsibility and ongoing learning and growth is reinforced. As I see it, delegating and delegation is an expression of your faith, trust, and belief in your people and is an investment in them as people.

Delegation and Succession?

Perhaps one day, maybe in a few years you will retire. When that happens, it is likely that they may ask you to provide a few names as a possible successor. Your experience with delegating and with those who met or exceeded your expectations could help you determine a list of candidates.

And when they ascend to your position, you can bet that what they learned through delegation that it will become an important tool in their leadership toolbox.

The bottom line...delegation when it executed properly can not only save you time, but also improve your productivity but can deepen the capacity that of your employees and empower them with new skills and abilities. And that is the very definition of WIN/WIN!

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