

The Fine Art of Delegation: Five Vital Tips

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How many times have you heard a manager avoid a delegation opportunity with excuses such as...

- “It’s easier to do it myself”
- “It takes too long to explain”
- “I can do it better anyway”
- “Isn’t it my job to do this?”

These are four of the most common reasons managers don’t delegate. Digging deeper, however, can’t we add the following to the list?

- “How do I delegate anyway?”
- “How do I know how much to delegate?”
- “What if my idea is better, should I substitute my good judgment?” or,
- “If I delegate this task to someone else, doesn’t it make my job irrelevant: what value do I add?”

Given that delegation can be time consuming, often involves a task that the delegator can do with “her eyes closed,” and requires the ability to communicate effectively to ensure understanding by the delegate, why is it an important skill for managers and leaders to acquire and execute? Among the key factors:

1. **Efficiency**— Delegation improves efficiency when a task is given to a team member whose skillsets are a better match for the project; while the delegator’s job is to set the goal, and coach the team member to success.
2. **Development**— The team member develops confidence and gains an understanding of how his or her contribution adds to the overall success of the team; while the delegator enhances her or his coaching skills.
3. **Better Results** – “Nothing succeeds like success,” thus the team members’ growing confidence in their ability to add value encourages risk-taking and break-through thinking, which can lead to better results.
4. **Frees Up the Delegator** – When the delegating manager succeeds and is confident the tasks will be accomplished by her team; she is able to refocus energy on strategic projects and other over-arching organizational goals. In short, she makes herself promotable.

Since delegation is such a vital skill set for managers and leaders, here are five vital tips to make it easier and more effective.

Tip #1: Delegate to Results, Not Process

Wow – sounds like a pithy statement; however, what does it mean? In brief, it means determining what the goal, or end result of the delegated task or project is and communicating it. Asked another way, what end product is required for the delegation to have been successful? Understanding this necessitates the delegator spending time up-front to determine what the ultimate goal is. A “drive-by” delegation often results in an unfortunate result.

A story is useful here. Imagine that a nonprofit was just awarded a \$500,000.00 grant from the county to house homeless veterans. The CEO delegated writing the thank-you letter for her signature to the Program Director. The Program Director wrote the letter, it contained all the elements required by the CEO and was grammatically correct. However, the CEO just didn't like the style; should she change the letter?

While thinking about the answer, let's move onto the next vital tips before we answer that question.

Tip #2: Delegate in Bite-Sized Pieces

If the project involves many steps, and the delegator is unsure whether the team member is able to complete the entire task, then the delegating manager can assign out portions of the overall job.

What if the CEO had delegated pieces of the letter to the Program Director rather than the finished product retaining that task to herself? After all, the CEO knew (or should have known) that she prized her own writing style, and that it would be problematic if the letter wasn't reflective of that style. Knowing this, or taking the time to recognize this about herself, she could have divided up the tasks by:

- Asking the Program Director to contribute where his skillsets were a match, by gathering the facts and figures only and then handing off the writing of the letter to the CEO; or,
- Giving him a copy of her writing style, expressing that she was fussy about her letters, and asking him to take a stab at it, recognizing that she might change it; or,
- Asking him for a draft letter, indicating she would give him feedback along the way to ensure it was reflective of her style.

Tip #3: Provide the Tools to Get the Job Done

This entails the delegator providing the resources needed, which could be time, budget, knowledge, or equipment. It might involve removing other projects from the employee's plate, and/or granting the delegate access to others for assistance.

Had the CEO done that in this case, she could have:

- Advised the Program Director when she needed the letter and its importance to the agency and to her;
- Removed other projects from his plate, or re-prioritized those projects;
- Informed the Program Director that because she was rather finicky about her letters, that he might like to consult with the Facilities Manager who just wrote a letter that the CEO signed.

Tip #4: Check in Without Hovering

None of us likes someone looking over our shoulder while we work. In addition to adding to the stress level, we often don't produce our best work under those circumstances. By the same token, delegating something big or small is risky business and managers want to ensure that the finished product is what they wanted. After all, the buck stops, ultimately, with the delegating manager.

Given this, the CEO in our example could have satisfied her need to ensure successful completion of the task by:

- Advising the Program Director at the outset that she was happy to answer any and all questions, inviting him to come to her once all the facts had been gathered to sketch out how he planned to write the letter; or,
- Checking in to ask how it was going, answering questions and providing suggestions; or, to see the letter in progress.

Tip #5 Resist the Temptation to Substitute Your Excellent Solution

If the delegator follows tip #1, which is to delegate to results not process, and the result is exactly what the delegator was looking for, then the process by which the delegate got there should be irrelevant. The delegator should avoid substituting the way in which she would have done it for the way in which it was done!

In our example, the result or goal was a letter for the CEO's signature that: stated all the facts; expressed thanks for the grant; and, was grammatically correct. Since the letter met the stated goals, the CEO should **not** substitute what she believes is her "better" writing style for that of the Program Director. After all, if she felt that strongly about her style, she should not have delegated the letter writing!

The Result

When managers follow these five tips, they add value to the organization and their team. They utilize others with important skill-sets; they demonstrate through actions how those skill sets add value to the team; they motivate employees to continue to strive for new and better ideas that often lead to better results; and, the delegating managers free themselves up to tackle critical tasks and strategic organizational priorities. These managers make themselves promotable.