



For Managers, Principals, Team Leaders and Internal Consultants
Author: Henry Blatman

Issue No 15: Delegation is not an act, its an intention

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Delegation is not an act, its an intention

The word delegation is simple enough and if I ask most people they would say it means, "Giving someone else some work," or, "Getting work off my desk onto someone else's." It sounds simple; however, in practice getting delegation right proves harder to do.

I offer you this expanded definition of delegation:

Passing work on to others who are capable of completing that work, (given the appropriate amount of training, coaching and supervision), and with the intention of creating time to work on tasks important to your role.

In this report I want to look beyond the simple act of moving a piece of work to another's desk and discuss some of the challenges of effective delegation and how you may overcome them.

Under-delegation

One client recently barked at me:

"I am good at delegating," when I dared to challenge his effectiveness.

After further discussion, it was clear he was very good at delegating some work but hoarded other work that he was comfortable with and liked to do. What he was therefore neglecting to do was the real (important) work of his role as the senior manager and leader, such as: coaching, retaining good staff and finding new staff; proactively managing key client relationships and taking a strategic view across all areas of his business.

The difficulty many managers have with delegation is that they either do not understand what their role is, or they are resistant completing the real tasks required for their role. Frankly, a surprising number of managers are not being held (or holding themselves) accountable. I have seen a general manager

working on the weekly payroll (yes every week), managing directors working out quotes that can be done by at least six others in the organisation, and partners in accounting practices photocopying documents for clients, "...just to get it done."

In these situations the managers are controlling their workflow. Letting go of some of the work will mean that they must start doing work which is likely, for one reason or another, to be outside of their comfort zone. I have found that controlling work, (not to be confused with 'being in control'), and leadership (risk, courage, mentoring) are strange bed fellows. If you wish to grow your business and free your time you need to 'control' less and focus more of your efforts on truly leading.

This same client who took umbrage at my questioning has now let go of some tasks and, not surprisingly, his staff have taken on these tasks with enthusiasm and exceeded the expectations of my client. As a result my client has more time and my work with him now is to ensure that he stays focused and is accountable for the real tasks of his role as a manager. A good test for any manager is to ask, "If I delegated 30% of my work, (easily what most managers could delegate from polls I have taken), what would I then do?" If you can not answer this question easily, you have got some thinking to do. The key is to get some clarity on what your next step is. Without this clarity nothing will change.

The costs of ineffective delegation

Common excuses for not delegating include: 'I can't find good staff', or 'It's faster for me just to do it'. But from a big picture perspective, you need to understand the costs of not delegating which are:

- Skill building is stifled making succession planning almost impossible
- Under-utilising staff and not allowing them to reach their potential (which often means they will leave or morale is lowered);
- Creating blocks in the flow of the business (important work and decisions get blocked by you because you have too much else to attend to); and, most importantly,
- Productive output comes at a higher cost meaning there is wastage when the work completed by senior staff could be done by more junior members of staff
- Avoiding or ignoring the real tasks that are required of a leader in business building the business, keeping abreast of industry trends, networking, creating and maintaining a great team of people.

A manager is usually vested with two things to carry out their role: authority and responsibility.

A manager can delegate the responsibility and vest authority in a person to complete the required tasks. What managers should not do, (if they are to carry out their role effectively), is pass all of the responsibility onto others. An

effective manager will ensure they supervise and that there is adequate instruction, coaching and training for staff to complete their work. I have often heard staff lament that work has been thrown at them without much communication, causing undue stress and reducing motivation. While staff members have a responsibility to clarify expectations their managers have of them, managers also need to be available (physically and mentally) to do this.

Supervision is particularly important when giving someone work they have not done before. Words like, "Come and see me if you have a problem," are empty if you don't make the time to be there or keep canceling meetings for seemingly more important appointments. Think about the message you are giving to your staff when you behave in this way.

Solving delegation issues

You will need to supervise each staff member differently depending on their individual style and level of competency. By style, I mean that some staff members will simply ask for (even demand) more of your time, while others will be more hesitant to ask for help and advice. You need to build adequate checks and balances to make sure that work is being done, but also that you spend your time supporting those who need it (rather than just with those who make the most noise!). Ask those who are not forthcoming how they are progressing and what they need from you to succeed in their work. For those who take more of your time, set them a number of tasks to do, reassure them that you have confidence in their ability and suggest that they come and speak to you when they've had a good go at completing all of the tasks.

Different people need different levels of acknowledgement and reassurance. Take the time to understand where each of your staff members sit on this continuum and don't judge their style, just realise that their effectiveness will come from your ability to flex your style to best support them.

Getting it just right

Delegation is not a precise science. More than anything delegation is about your attitude to your role as a leader: are you there to simply perform and carry out tasks, or are you there to grow and develop your staff and your business? Your real power will come as you lead, motivate and teach others, thereby ensuring that the capability of your organisation grows well beyond any individual. This is true leadership.

How will you know if delegation is working? A full checklist can be found at: <http://www.icleadership.com.au/self-assessment-delegation.htm>

"The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and self-restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they do it". Theodore Roosevelt

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Henry Blatman
Leadership and Performance Coach
Ph: 61 3 9699 7771