

The Basics of Delegating

Introduction

Delegation involves passing responsibility for the completion of work to other people. This article examines benefits of delegation, common reasons why delegation is avoided and what should *not* be delegated. A five-step process to use when planning delegation then follows.

Use this as a guide to help you determine where and how you can delegate aspects of your job to keep your time focused, build staff capacity and otherwise strengthen the management of your organization.

What's in it for you and your organization? Delegation is useful for the following reasons:

- Delegation allows you to develop people to look after routine tasks that are not cost- or time-effective for you to carry out.
- Delegation transfers work to people whose skills in a particular area are better than yours, saving your time for you to focus on activities at which you are best.
- Delegation frees your time for things that only you can do.
- Transfer of responsibility develops your staff, and can increase their effectiveness and enjoyment of their jobs.
- Effective delegation removes some of the stress of managing, allowing you not only to focus on what's most important, but allowing a bit of peace of mind as well.
- As a manager, the ideal position to reach is to have your staff carry out all the routine activities of your team. This leaves you time to plan, think, and direct the strategic development of your part of the organization. In reality, the lean staffing of most nonprofits will require a balance on your part between actual carrying out of activities and setting strategic direction, but there should definitely be time carved out for both!
- Building skills in your staff builds your group's strength overall.

Why do managers fail to delegate?

Despite the many apparent advantages of delegation, some managers do not do this well, or at all. Here are some of the common reasons why we often overlook the skill of delegation:

Lack of time

Delegating jobs does take time. In the early stages of handing off responsibilities to staff you may need to invest time in training and orienting people. When coaching and checking in are taken into account, jobs may take longer to achieve with delegation than they do if you do them yourself. Like any investment, it will take time for the results of your efforts to pay off, but with the right techniques and the right people, you will find increasingly beneficial returns.

Perfectionism and fear of mistakes

Just as you have to develop staff to do jobs quickly without your involvement, you will have to let people make mistakes, and help them to correct them. You run the risk of producing work of a lower quality level while people are learning. Most people will, with time, learn to do jobs

properly—if the manager uses good technique in delegation, coaching and quality control.

Enjoying “getting my hands dirty”

You may feel that by doing jobs yourself, you get them done most effectively. If, however, members of your staff are standing idle while you do this, then your department will be seriously inefficient. Bear in mind the benefits of having a team and the cost of everyone’s time when you are tempted to do a job yourself.

Inability to give up the old job

It is common for people who are newly promoted to managerial positions to have difficulty delegating. Often they will have been promoted because they were good at what they were doing. This brings the temptation to continue trying to do their previous job, rather than developing their new subordinates to do that job well.

Fear of surrendering authority

Whenever you delegate, you surrender some element of authority and control (but not of responsibility!) This is inevitable. By effective delegation, however, you get the benefits of adequate time to do YOUR job really well.

Concerns for staff

When people appear overwhelmed with work, there is a tendency for managers to take on more of the load personally. This risks burnout and overall loss of effectiveness. Maybe there is no real solution to having more work than the group can handle, but effective delegation is one tool to help get the work distributed in the optimal arrangement.

Also, managers often feel protective of staff that are not performing up to an acceptable standard, believing that delegated work would just come back to them anyway. This path will certainly perpetuate a cycle of non-performance. You must choose the correct level of expectation for each person and then manage effectively to it.

Fear of becoming invisible

Where your department is running smoothly with all routine work effectively delegated, it may appear that you have nothing to do. Not a chance! Now you have the time to think, plan and focus on the tougher challenges and new opportunities for your group to fulfill its mission.

Belief that staff “are not up to the job”

Talented people will often under-perform if they are bored. Delegation can help “raise the bar” and bring out the best in them. On the flip side, people who are not such high performers will not be effective unless you invest time in them anyway.

What should not be delegated?

While you should delegate as many tasks as possible that are not cost effective for you to carry out, ensure that you do not delegate the control and strategic direction of your team. Remember that you bear ultimate responsibility for the success or failure of what you are trying to accomplish.

Effective delegation involves achieving the correct balance between effective control of work and letting people get on with jobs in their own way. If you are not clear where the best balance lies in a given case, talk it over with a peer or others. Remember, there is no exact science to delegation, and no one person has all the answers. Experiment and take some risks to develop your own ‘best practice’ in delegating work to others.

Five Steps to Delegation

The following model will help you understand how to go about delegating jobs to members of your staff. Use this as the basis for making plans to delegate specific tasks to particular people. With practice, this model will become a way of thinking about getting work done that becomes automatic.

1. Task Analysis: Decide what to delegate

One way of deciding what to delegate is simply to list the things that you do which could be more effectively done by someone either more skilled in a particular area, or less expensive. Alternatively you may decide to use an activity log as the basis of your decision to delegate: this will show you where you are spending large amounts of time on low-yield jobs.

In any case, think carefully about all of the responsibilities you carry. Separate the ones that *only you can do*. All the rest are available for delegation. Begin working through which of these remaining tasks would be most helpful for you and others if you were to give them away.

2. Appointment: Select capable, willing people to carry out specific jobs

To what extent you can delegate jobs will depend on the ability, experience and reliability of your staff. Good people will be able to carry out large jobs with little or no intervention from you. Inexperienced or less reliable people will need close supervision to get a job done to the correct standard. However, if you coach, encourage and allow those who may currently be inexperienced sufficient practice, you may improve their ability to carry out larger and larger tasks unsupervised.

3. Briefing: Explain why the job needs doing, and what results are expected

When you have matched a job to delegate with a suitable candidate, plan to explain how it fits into the overall picture of what you are trying to achieve. Ensure that you communicate effectively the:

- Specific results that are needed
- Context and importance of the job
- Constraints within which it should be carried out
- Limits to authority within which staff needs to operate
- Resources available to them in getting the job done
- Deadlines for completion and milestones when you want information on the progress of the project

4. Control: Monitor, coach and give support where needed

Once you have decided to delegate a task, let your employee get on with it. Review the project

on the agreed-upon reporting dates, but do not constantly look over their shoulders. Accept that there may be different ways of completing a particular task, and that your delegate may come up with a better way of doing something than you have thought of. Also, accept that one of the best ways of really learning something is through making mistakes. Within reason, try to accept mistakes that are not caused by idleness, and that lead to learning for your delegate or others.

That said, it is imperative that you support your subordinates when they are having difficulties by being available and offering coaching. The tendency might be to jump in and do the job for them. If you do, then they will not develop the skills, experience and confidence to do the job themselves.

5. Appraisal: Review the results of your delegation and give honest feedback

It is common to accept the results of the delegated task and quickly move on to other things. Everyone involved will learn more if you enforce the discipline of formally evaluating the delegation. Questions like “What worked well?” and “How could we do this better next time?” will help build a culture of delegation in your group.

Remember as well that people grow best when they are given honest and direct feedback on performance. Delegation allows the manager ample opportunity to provide feedback to the delegate.

Positive feedback should emphasize the behavior that achieved the desired result, essentially reinforcing for the delegate what to keep doing. Feedback for improvement should focus on how a particular outcome didn’t meet the goal or quality standard and engage the delegate in how this can be improved. In either case, focus should be on the actions the person took (or failed to take) rather than on the person themselves.