



Too Much to Do: Four Keys to Effective Delegating

It's one of the most important skills a leader can have

By Paul Lemberg

It's not that you have too many important things to do. The problem is either (1) you're trying to do them all yourself, or (2) all of them simply aren't that important.

So one solution is to shrink the things you classify as important, and that should certainly be your first step. But, for most people, the leftovers still leave too much to do.

Enter delegation.

Successful delegation is a critical success factor for anyone who wants to be an effective leader. The definition of leadership is getting things done through the medium of other people. If you want to do big things, you have to extend your reach beyond your ability to do everything at once. So you must lead and you must delegate. It's axiomatic.

The harder you try to hold on to things, the faster they'll get away from you. And the more important your project, the faster it will spin out of control. Lack of good delegating skills can be a real show stopper.

Why is delegation so difficult,

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even frightening? First of all, you may enjoy doing the thing you have to delegate, and it's hard to give up something you genuinely like. You may think you do it better than anyone else. You imagine it won't get done as well as if you did it. How could it, if you're the best?

You may even believe if you don't do that thing, you won't have enough to do. This last is laughable, considering that the title of this article is "Too Much to Do." Yet, in your gut, part of you feels this way.

Know this: Whatever things you should give away and don't will get shorter shrift and less attention than they deserve. If they're important at all, these things will become bottlenecks blocking your organization's growth and success.

So here they are — the four keys to successful and effective delegation.

1. Give the job to someone who can get it done.

Don't just hand things over to the next warm body. Get buy-in from delegates first. Do they have the time? The resources? The energy? Are they enrolled, or is this just more work for someone who's already overburdened? Find someone who has (1) the skills, knowledge, and resources needed, and (2) the time to do it. If you dump your projects onto people without the wherewithal or availability, you're setting them up to fail.

2. Communicate your "conditions of satisfaction."

Have a clear picture of what success looks like. Did you ever ask someone to do something that came back quite different from what you expected? Be sure you have mutual agreement on critical requirements. How do you want it to look? What are the parameters? What format must it take? Are there any special processes that need to be used? Particular people you want engaged? And — often most important — by when?

Use SMART (specific, measurable, actionable, relevant, time-based)

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goals to clarify the desired outcome. Create a timeline. Also, if necessary, set up a measurement system that will help you and your delegate know whether things are on or off track. You can abbreviate this step if the task is simple, but make sure to have your bases covered.

3. Work out a plan.

How will the project get done? This doesn't mean you should micro-manage; that's the very opposite of what you need. But one key to delegating is knowing the project can get done and will get done. Depending on the degree of difficulty, you may ask that the first step of the plan is to work out the plan. In other cases, your request may be simple and a plan not necessary. But think this through: Decide whether a plan is needed; if so, make sure there is one.

4. Establish a feedback loop.

How are you going to get updates and give feedback or advice? When are you going to

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speak or meet? How frequently? Will your delegate send you an e-mail or a formal progress report? Create some pre-defined mechanism to keep you informed and to give your delegate a way to seek guidance.

Delegating isn't abdicating. There's a big difference between the two. When you abdicate, you're saying, "I'm neither responsible nor accountable for the results." When you delegate, you're still accountable for the results. You're asking someone else to do the work, but it's ultimately your work. To paraphrase Harry Truman, the buck stops with you. ■

Resources

"Build a Powerful Staff Team," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 4.

DeVos, Karen, "Purpose, Results, Key Indicators, Feedback," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 3, No. 5.

Lemberg, Paul, "What Not to Do, and How Not to Do It," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 19, No. 6.

Articles from Volumes 14 to the present are available free on-line at www.snpo.org/members, and articles prior to Volume 14 are available on CD-ROM at http://www.snpo.org/resources/product_catalog.php.

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