

Chapter 5: From Delegating to Empowering

Overview

“If you want something done right, do it yourself.” Many first-time managers believe that, and to a large extent, it is true. However, no one can do everything. Besides, delegating and empowering employees has positive benefits. Both build employee abilities, experience, and confidence.

Yes, delegation and empowerment take time in preparation and follow-through, but the costs of avoiding it are high. A manager who does neither or does them poorly will seem disorganized and will spend a lot of time on catching up on work. If you try to do everything yourself, you will wind up exhausted, while your staff will have too much free time. Work will be bottlenecked, maybe deadlines will be missed, and work quality will be poor.

Why do managers resist delegating work to their employees or empowering their workers? Resistance may be greater to empowerment than to delegation, because empowerment entails more than assigning a task—it involves giving authority over the task. But in both instances, a major reason for opposition is managers’ concern that delegation and empowerment mean they are abdicating responsibility. Not so. Consider the definitions of both words.

Delegation involves giving an employee the responsibility for part of your job and the authority to carry it out, while retaining control and accountability. *Empowerment* involves not only giving responsibility and accountability for a task but also the responsibility and authority to make decisions tied to the assignment while, again, retaining control and accountability. *Retaining control and accountability* is the critical phrase in both definitions. It means that you avoid two managerial mistakes. The first is to dump a task, walking away and forgetting about it. The second is to appear to delegate or empower but stay so close to the employee that you are practically hovering over the shoulder. One of your goals in either delegation or empowerment is to set up a means by which you can monitor what is happening without stifling initiative.

Other concerns managers have about delegation and empowerment are:

- *Lack of trust.* Managers who don’t delegate or empower worry that their employees won’t be able to do the job right. Better that they do it themselves and ensure that the work is done correctly, they think. But if you give the right instructions, you needn’t worry that the work won’t meet your expectations.
- *Loss of control.* Another reason managers don’t delegate or empower is that they fear that the employees to whom they give the work won’t do it the same way they would. But no one says that there is only one way to get something done. Often, employees find more effective or efficient ways to do work previously done by their manager.
- *Fear of loss of position.* Some managers who refuse to delegate or empower admit to a worry that an employee may show them up and take their job. They fear that the employee will demonstrate more skill at doing the work and making decisions tied to the chore than the manager—and the manager doesn’t want that to happen. But managers who don’t delegate or empower are showing their higher-ups that they can’t effectively manage the people who report to them. After all, management is getting work done through others—which is what delegation and empowerment are all about.

Admittedly, problems can arise when we delegate or empower. You can expect mistakes to happen. Our responsibility, through training and coaching, is to minimize them. We can also minimize troubles if we do both right. That's why I use the term *thoughtful* when referring to both practices.

Let me start by describing how to avoid problems when delegating tasks.

Delegation—Doing It Right

When you think about how delegating will save you time—how it will free you to focus on your many other tasks—you may be less leery about it. To ensure that things go smoothly, you should:

- *Set standards.* By making your expectations clear to your employees—the quality of the work, the time frame for its completion, and the like—you will increase the chances that the finished work will be satisfactory.
- *Train your employees to handle the assignment.* Spend time up front preparing your employees to handle the task well. Because delegated work is generally task oriented, the training is usually skill based.
- *Build employee confidence.* Employees with previous experience under managers who dislike delegating often are unwilling to take on other assignments. After all, who would want to have someone hovering over the shoulder and criticizing every move made? Because some employees have been burned, you will have to demonstrate that you will give them a fair chance to show what they are capable of doing.

Praise them for previous work and point up their knowledge and skills. Your staff members need to know that you chose them to do a task because of their competence—and, most importantly, because you trust them to do the job well.

Six Questions

Now, to get down to the actual delegation, you need to consider six questions: who, what, when, where, why, and how.

Who

Choosing the right person for a task requires careful assessment of experience and abilities. Different tasks require different skills. For example, you may need someone who is good at organizing schedules and budgets, or who is an enthusiastic and cooperative team player, or who can work well under tight deadlines, or who can take initiative. Consider the qualities of all your staff members and think about which individuals have the right skills, abilities, knowledge, and attitude to take on the work.

Not all of your employees will be able to take on the added work. They may lack the skills or knowledge about the work that would make it possible to do the job well. While delegation can be used to train and develop talented employees' range and depth of skills, you need to be sure that you have the time to support the delegates until they can operate independently.

Alternatively, to prepare for the next opportunity for delegation, you may want to offer training or coaching in areas where the individual has deficiencies (see Chapter 6).

What if you have someone capable and willing but who is too busy to do more? Reshuffle tasks among staff members, freeing the potential delegate to take on the task by giving some of the employee's previous work to coworkers without full workloads.

Not all staff will agree to take on the added work. Some will say no because of a perceived lack of autonomy. Others will say no because they doubt their ability to do the work well. In both of these instances, you need to give honest reassurances. To reassure the former, address the employee more as partner than as subordinate, presenting the task as an opportunity to develop skills and experience. In the latter case, discuss the support, both formal and informal, that the individual can call on.

What if an employee refuses to take on the work and disagrees that the work fits within his or her job description? The employee offers to do the work, but only if you come up with a generous raise or an offer of a promotion. You might want to say yes, but don't. At best, offer to mention the additional work in the employee's performance assessment. If the employee isn't satisfied, then the answer is the same: the year-end appraisal will reflect the person's response.

What if the person still says no? Cut your losses and look for someone else.

What

What you decide to delegate to your employees can have a great deal of range. Typically, it is safe to delegate:

- *Paperwork.* Many administrative duties can be delegated to employees. This not only saves you time but also gives an employee a better understanding of how the department runs.
- *Routine.* Tasks done on a regular basis can be shared or rotated among your employees, again giving them an opportunity to understand workflow better.
- *Technical issues.* Delegating responsibility for technical matters is a good way to recognize an employee's aptitudes.
- *Tasks that offer learning opportunities.* Any assignment that provides your employees with the chance to learn new things, to acquire skills, or to exercise their creativity is a desirable assignment to delegate.

What shouldn't you delegate to your employees?

- *Personnel matters.* Hiring, firing, mediating team conflicts, counseling, handling grievances, and discussing salary issues are all managerial responsibilities that should never be delegated to staff.
- *Confidential matters.* Anything that requires secrecy should not be delegated. Even secretarial and clerical tasks involving issues that cannot be shared—for instance, performance assessments—should be done by you.
- *Crises.* In a crisis situation, you won't have time to explain what needs to be done. You are the only one capable of taking immediate action. Your level of authority may also be needed to resolve the situation.

- *Tasks assigned to you.* Anything that your own manager asks you to handle yourself should not be delegated to an employee, no matter how capable.

When

Knowing when to delegate added responsibility is just as important as knowing what and to whom to delegate.

If you want to use the new assignment as a reward for improved or outstanding work, make the assignment at the same time that you are praising the employee. If the employee is still under a lot of work pressure at that time, you can offer congratulations on earning the new assignment but assure the worker that the new task will not have to be started until the current project is completed or much further along.

Where

Where is closely related to when in thoughtful delegation.

For instance, you might announce that you are assigning one of your employees a high-visibility task. The announcement recognizes past work. Also, making the new responsibility public will ensure that the employee has the support of coworkers and other managers in getting the work done.

In other cases, a private meeting is best suited for delegating a new assignment or task to an employee. Perhaps you are assigning the employee the work on a trial basis, or that employee is unsure about assuming the new responsibility. Use your judgment with each situation.

Why

Besides the *whys* for delegation and empowerment mentioned above, here's another reason for delegation: delegation will set a positive tone in your team. Employees know that you will be looking for assignments to give them that will allow them to develop their skills and help them increase their employability. Reporting to you, your employees will know that they will not stagnate in repetitive jobs, because you periodically give them opportunities to take on new challenges.

How

The way in which you delegate can have as much influence on whether the employee succeeds or fails as the employee's own ability. Successful delegation requires the following five steps with each assignment to every employee:

1. *Give complete instructions.* Do not assume that the employee already has the information to do the work. The employee must understand what results are expected, what the limits of authority are, why he or she was selected for the assignment, where and when the work is to be done, who is involved in the task, and any methods that are mandatory in completing the task.
2. *Grant sufficient authority.* Make certain that your employee has the necessary clearance to obtain and use needed materials or equipment. Inform others that the employee is in

charge of the job and has the authority to make decisions. Each time a job is delegated, the amount of authority your delegate has should be clearly identified.

3. *Maintain communications.* Many managers mistakenly believe that they no longer need to be involved with a project once they have delegated authority or given an employee an assignment. They make the error of giving an employee a sink or swim test, rather than maintaining contact with the employee and being accessible to make sure no crises develop. Your coaching sessions are an ideal occasion to review progress on assignments, discuss problems, and offer criticism, which is Step #4.
4. *Make constructive criticism.* Delegation is a learning experience for your employee, so mistakes will be made. When that happens, focus on the problem, not the person. Don't say, "I can't believe what you did!" Say instead, "Let's look at what happened." Employee mistakes should not be seen as reason for chastising but as a further opportunity for learning. Keep in mind that learning is a lifelong experience not only for you but also for your employees.

Certainly, don't take back an assignment once it is given. You may have to be involved more than you expected, but in the end, the employee should have a valuable learning experience. You may then want to reevaluate your own methods for choosing that individual for that particular assignment. However, keep in mind that selecting the right person is your problem, not your employee's.

5. *Reward success.* When one of your employees successfully completes an assignment, don't forget to say thanks for a job well done and to congratulate the employee on a significant accomplishment. Make a concerted effort to praise the employee—don't try to slip the compliment into another conversation: "By the way, that was a good job on the Jones deal."

Reverse the Reverse Delegation

I mentioned that you shouldn't take back a delegated assignment when it becomes evident that your employee is experiencing problems. Reverse delegation occurs when an employee returns the task to the manager who assigned it. The buck passing often goes unnoticed by managers, because it often happens very informally. For instance, an employee may say, "Boy, have I had a rough time today," which prompts the manager to ask, "What kind of help do you need?" or to offer, "Tell me about it." Either way, the manager is hooked. Before he or she knows it, the manager has resumed responsibility for the task. Told the nature of the problem, the manager might say, "Let me think about it, and I'll get back to you," or, "I can see your problem. Let me see what I can do about it." The employee may want to give up the task, or the manager may like to feel needed. Whatever the reason, the end result is the same: the manager is now stuck with the "delegated" task.

If you, over time, delegate work but then see yourself stuck with it, you may want to reverse the reverse delegation. The secret is to stop the process right at the start. Don't take on the problem. Rather, ask the employee to think further about the situation and come back with some potential solutions. You might even add, "Thank you for making me aware of the problem." You leave the responsibility for the task with the employee.

True Empowerment

Empowerment is very similar to delegation and, consequently, demands the same management approach. Empowered employees suffer, however, when their managers haven't prepared them to make wise decisions. A manager says, "I'd like to empower you to do so and so," then walks away. The employee makes decisions, but too often they are the wrong ones. Upon failure, the manager comes down on the employee.

Empowering without preparation—that is, removing the safety net (yourself) without first preparing your employees—is like letting a young child cross the street alone without first explaining the difference between red and green lights. Employees are very likely to get into trouble if they don't know what they should and shouldn't do. They'll fall flat on their faces, which will discourage them from trying again—and discourage you from letting them try again, despite all the benefits you could gain if you provided a little grounding in the needed skills.

Making Empowerment Work

If you want to empower your employees—truly empower them—you need to do the following:

Invest in your employees' knowledge, skills, and ability. Failure to train is shortsighted, whether your goal is to delegate or empower. When you delegate, you want to be sure that the employee is capable of handling the responsibility. In the case of empowerment, training can not only enable your employees to handle the work but also contribute to increased self-esteem, which will make employees more comfortable with greater responsibility.

Training should involve not only the skills, abilities, and knowledge your empowered employee will need but also corporate values and business finance. The training in financial management shouldn't be so complex that only an economist could understand it. I know of one company that built its financial management training around the idea of a children's lemonade stand, a model easily understood by the plant's managers. The company found a way to put complex ideas into simple words and graphs and pie charts, and you can do the same for your work unit.

Believe in your employees' ability to be successful. You have to trust your employees to do a job well when you empower, just as when you delegate. Your workers will know that you have faith in them to make the right decisions.

Be clear about your expectations. Your employees need insights into your goals, beyond just task completion. Be sure they know about the importance you place on quality or customer service or market share. Your priorities should influence their decisions.

Provide a safety net. Set up management controls to ensure that you hear about problems before they grow beyond control. There are limits to what empowered employees can do, and they need to know them. One example might be modifying work procedures without getting approval from those responsible for initially setting them.

Identify those who can and those who can't be empowered. Those with the capability to be empowered should be asked if they have seen problems that they would like to address or decisions they would like to handle. Not only does this query demonstrate your desire to empower your employees, it demonstrates your interest in your staff's growth and development,

something that can't help but motivate your employees. Those unable to handle empowerment may still handle delegation.

Share information. Empowered employees need to know the situation from a micro and macro perspective. "They don't really care about the organization's goals or objectives," you say. If you're right, then the blame rests with you. A caring attitude is something you as a manager need to create in your employees.

Put peer pressure to work. Recognition helps ensure that delegated work gets done. It also ensures that employees fully utilize the opportunity that comes with empowerment. Let employees' peers know when their coworkers have broken sales records, identified new product offerings, or found ways to reduce accident levels. Demonstrate the respect they have earned, so that their peers will want the same opportunity.

Tips

Use delegation and empowerment to train your staff members.

Pick delegates who are confident enough to admit they are encountering problems.

Make sure that those empowered to oversee tasks are not limited by lack of others' support, both within and outside your unit.

As a new manager, you may have to overcome bad experiences your employees may have had with managers who talked about empowering their staff members but did nothing more than heap more work upon them. When you use the term empowerment, you have to mean it. You have to demonstrate to your workers by your actions that empowerment isn't just the latest management buzzword. Otherwise, you will wind up with disappointed, demoralized employees.

Expect delegates to achieve performance at least equal to your own. Otherwise, coaching is in order.

Yes or No How many of these statements reflect your thinking?

I use my failures to learn valuable lessons for future delegating and empowering.

I make opportunities to recognize employees who have taken on delegated or empowered responsibilities.

I ensure that I am accessible to provide feedback to employees with delegated and empowered responsibilities.

I keep an up-to-date log of which tasks I have delegated and which ones I have empowered, and to whom.

I encourage delegates and empowered employees to use their initiative when confronted with problems.

I ensure that my employees understand the extent of their accountability from delegation and empowerment.

I monitor progress but don't constantly intervene.

I see that staff members are trained in the skills, abilities, or knowledge associated with tasks delegated or empowered.

I keep notes of errors made and lessons learned for future reference.

I recognize the effort that my employees put into completion of a delegated or empowered task and reward them for it.

Did You Know? Delegation and empowerment are done more freely in the United States than in Japan, where failure is considered shameful. Germany is similar to Japan. Actually, in most highly structured cultures, managers retain more control of tasks, delegating and empowering less.

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