



Delegating with Confidence: Avoid Being Overworked and Overwhelmed

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Delegating with Confidence

Avoid Being Overworked and Overwhelmed

Key Topics Covered in This Chapter

- *The benefits of delegating*
- *Signs that you should do more delegating or more effective delegating*
- *Guidelines for effective delegating*
- *Approaches to delegation*
- *Preparing to delegate*
- *Making the assignment*
- *Monitoring performance*
- *Learning through after-action review*

MANY MANAGERS FEEL overwhelmed with too many problems and too much to do. Are you one of them? Do you find yourself running out of time while your subordinates are running out of work? If you do, you should examine your approach to delegating work.

The job of management is to get results through people and other resources. Among other things, that means delegating many tasks to others. *Delegation* is the assignment of a specific task or project by one person to another, and the assignee's commitment to complete the task or project. When you delegate, you not only transfer work to another person; you also transfer accountability for completing that work to stated standards.

Delegation is one of the most important skills demonstrated by successful managers, and one often neglected by "overworked" managers. Effective delegators spend less time "doing" and more time planning work assignments, organizing resources for delegates, and coaching people who need help. This chapter explains the timeless principles of delegating, and practical ideas for applying them today.¹

Benefits of Delegating

Effective delegation can have real benefits for you, your people, and your organization. Let's start with you. When you delegate, you reduce your workload and stress level by removing tasks from your to-do list that others are qualified to handle. This will give you more

time to focus on activities that require your unique skills and authority: planning, business analysis, controlling operations, obtaining resources, and dealing with key people problems.

Delegating improves the level of trust between you and your staff. To get trust, you must first give trust, and delegating is one way to do so. The message in delegation is, “I trust you to get the job done.” It also helps everyone learn how to achieve goals through cooperative effort.

Lastly, delegating is an effective way of “testing” a staff member’s capabilities prior to offering a promotion. Assign a series of tasks to an employee and you’ll soon have a very good estimate of that person’s strengths and weaknesses.

Good employees likewise benefit from the delegation of tasks and projects. Every assignment is an opportunity to learn how to accept responsibility, to plan work, and to enlist the collaboration of others. In effect, delegating gives employees experience with managerial work. And developing people is part of your job.

Delegation makes some managers uneasy. They fear losing control of staff and projects, and worry that they’re abdicating their responsibilities. Sometimes they just believe that it’s more efficient to do the job themselves: “By the time I explained the job to Henry, I could do it by myself.” And maybe they could. In the long term, however, every manager must share some control and teach others how to do the work. Other excuses for insufficient delegation include:

“I don’t have confidence in my staff.” These managers should start delegating small tasks; this will allow them to build confidence gradually.

“I like to have things done my way.” This should not be an impediment. Managers can get things done their way by communicating preferences and standards. That’s more efficient than trying to do everything by themselves.

“My staff will resent the additional work.” Maybe so. But good employees appreciate opportunities to take responsibility for important work. And these are the ones you want to keep and develop.

Delegation and Empowerment

The term “empowerment” has been bandied about liberally over the past five or ten years. Is this term synonymous with delegation? If not, how is it different?

Delegation implies that the manager retains authority, control, and responsibility. To do otherwise would be abdication. The manager says, “This is what I’d like you to do.” Even if he or she describes the required ends without specifying the means, the manager will probably review the employee’s plan, and monitor performance as it unfolds. In the absence of authority, control, and responsibility, delegation is abandonment. Empowerment, on the other hand, shifts power and responsibility to the recipient. The empowered individual or team has the authority to determine the means and takes responsibility for results. Self-discipline and accountability are substitutes for the manager’s control.

“People expect me to be the problem solver and decision maker.” That’s true to an extent, but problem solvers and decisions makers are needed at all levels. Make it clear to your staff that your role is to support them in making decisions for themselves. Also, make it clear that some delegated tasks represent opportunities to do new and interesting work.

Warning Signs

Here are some “warning signs” that a manager’s delegating skills require sharpening. Do any apply to you?

- Your in-box is always full.
- You are regularly working overtime on tasks that “only you can do.”

- Delegated assignments are often incomplete and deadlines are missed.
- Direct reports feel that they lack the authority or resources to complete assignments.
- You second-guess staff decisions and personally rework staff assignments.
- Direct reports feel unprepared to carry out assigned tasks.
- You frequently intervene in projects assigned to others.
- Morale is low and staff turnover is rising.
- People are not taking responsibility for the tasks you delegate.

Guidelines for Effective Delegating

It is very important to establish the right tone and environment for effective delegating. You can do this if you follow these guidelines:

- Be very clear on what you want done, and on when and how results will be measured. Ambiguity on your part will lead to a disappointing experience.
- Encourage staff to tell you about their special interests at work and time availability for new projects.
- Build a sense of shared responsibility for the unit's overall goals.
- Avoid dumping only tedious or difficult jobs on your subordinates. Instead, delegate tasks that spark interest and can be enjoyable.
- Provide career opportunities for others by delegating functions that have high visibility within the company.
- Delegate to people whose judgment and competence you trust. This, of course, requires that you know your subordinates and their capabilities very well.

- Recognize that delegation is a learning experience for your staff, so offer training or coaching as needed.
- Develop trust in less-skilled staff members by delegating very structured assignments. Then provide the support they need to develop increased competence.
- Whenever possible, delegate an entire project or function, not just a small piece; this will increase motivation and commitment.
- Follow up, monitor, and provide feedback.
- Maintain open lines of communication. Say, “Let me know if you run into problems you cannot handle.”

Approaches to Delegation

Delegation can be carried out in several ways. It is usually best to delegate responsibility for an entire task, project, or function to one person. Dividing it among several people will create a condition in which no one “owns” the job. Even if the delegatee subdelegates parts of the job to others, the locus of responsibility will remain clear.

Delegating by task is the easiest approach and a good place to start if you’re new to this. It involves assigning specific tasks or subtasks to staff members. These might include writing a report, conducting research, or planning a meeting.

Delegating by project represents a higher level. A project involves a group of tasks associated with the achievement of a specific objective. Delegating by project increases the scope of the delegated assignment and generally requires a staff member who can handle a wide range of responsibilities. Examples of project delegations might include developing a new employee handbook, conducting a customer survey, or training other employees on a new piece of computer software.

Managers with large numbers of direct reports may choose to delegate assignments by function. A *function* refers to groups of tasks and projects that are all related to one ongoing activity such as sales, marketing, or training. In this approach, each function is delegated to

one staff member who provides the manager with regular updates on activities within that function.

Preparing to Delegate

As you prepare to delegate, first determine which tasks you want to delegate. When that's done, consider the skills and capabilities required to complete the assignment successfully. Finally, you need to match the assignment with the most appropriate staff member.

What (and What Not) to Delegate

Is your workload crushing you? If it is, assess that workload. Determine which parts of it others can handle. Be open to delegating these, even if they are jobs you enjoy doing and don't want to give up. Some of those chores could provide variety and motivational challenges to the right individuals.

Some assignable jobs require specific training or experience. And if a task is too important to assign to others, think about a sharing of responsibility. For instance, if you have a brochure development project, identify one person with excellent writing skills to write the text; team this person with another person who has graphics, layout, and production skills. Here's another example:

One of Colin's responsibilities during the first half of this year was to design, administer, and document an annual employee survey. This was a big job, but not so big that Colin couldn't handle it himself—as he had in previous years.

But times had changed. Now that he was the department manager, Colin had very little time to spare. Yes, he could still do this job himself, but that would involve many weekends in the office and take time away from other pressing responsibilities.

In the end, Colin formed a task force around the survey. He provided leadership and oversight, and two new employees with good analytical skills were assigned the time-consuming parts of the job. When

the final survey report was circulated within the company, it bore the names of Colin and his two helpers.

Of course, not all tasks can or should be delegated. As a manager, you should retain responsibility for the following tasks:

- Planning, directing, and motivating your people
- Employee performance evaluation
- Complex customer negotiations
- Tasks requiring your specific technical skills
- Hiring, firing, and career development

Other nonassignable tasks will depend on your circumstances.

Task Analysis

Once you've identified tasks or projects suitable for delegation, determine the work involved and skills required. Task analysis involves answering these three questions:

1. What thinking skills are needed for this job? (For example, problem-solving ability, logical thinking, decision making, planning, creative design.)
2. What activities must be performed and what equipment is needed? (For example, filing, using a word processor, organizing, training, developing.)
3. What interpersonal skills are needed to complete the assignment? (For example, speaking with suppliers, negotiating for resources, consulting with experts.)

The Right Person for the Job

Once you have identified the assignment and the required skills, ask yourself, "Which of my subordinates is the right person for the job?" As you ponder this question, be sure to consider the following:

- Any previously expressed desires by staffers for growth and development that could be addressed with this assignment. Ask yourself who has shown initiative and asked for a new challenge.
- The staff member's availability. Don't pile work on people who are already loaded to the limit—even if these people are conscientious and reliable.
- The level of assistance a staff member will need from you to complete the assignment.
- How long the staff member has been on the job. Avoid loading new employees with added assignments until they are comfortable with their core jobs.
- The number of previous assignments you have delegated to that person. Try to delegate tasks among all staff members to avoid any feelings of favoritism.
- The possibility of dividing the task between two or more people to make the best use of skills.

You'll be in a better position to select the right people if you routinely keep track of special skill sets that you may need to call upon for special projects. For example, someone who can simplify abstract concepts might make a good trainer, while good organizational abilities would be important for someone overseeing operations.

Making the Assignment

Once you've matched the right person with the task, you need to communicate the proposition and deliver sufficient authority to do the job. This should always be done in a face-to-face meeting in which you describe the assignment and secure the employee's acceptance of the task. Open communication and trust are critical factors in this interaction. To achieve both, do the following:

- Clearly describe the task, project, or function.

- Define its purpose and how it fits into the big picture.
- Review the scope of the employee's responsibilities.
- Identify other personnel who will be involved, if applicable, and describe their roles.
- Discuss feasible deadlines for completion.
- Establish agreed-upon standards of performance, measures of success, and levels of accountability.
- Set firm metrics for such things as quality, time, and cost.
- Be clear about the employee's accountability in meeting the standards you have agreed upon.
- Define the resources and support that will be available.
- Identify any materials and physical resources needed to complete the assignment and confirm their availability.
- If necessary, allocate additional staff to assist in meeting the assigned goals.
- Ask the employee what support she thinks she may need from you throughout the assignment.
- If special training or coaching is needed, discuss how it will be given.
- Agree on a date to review progress.

In granting authority to a staff member, it is important to establish clear guidelines and expectations from the start. The amount of authority you choose to give an individual depends upon his capabilities and your confidence in him. You will want to assess the staff member's past performance as a decision maker. You'll also want to determine the minimum amount of authority needed to complete the assignment successfully.

After you have determined the level of authority you will delegate, be sure to communicate your decision to everyone involved in the assignment or affected by it.

A Frequently Asked Question

“How can I avoid having staff members feel like I’m dumping work on them?” Some managers make the mistake of pushing every chore onto the one or two who either (a) have demonstrated that they can get things done, or (b) accept added work—unlike others—without having a tantrum. These reliable individuals may be flattered by their boss’s confidence in them—at least for a while. But too much of this can create a backlash, especially when those who take on the added work don’t feel that they are being compensated for it. “Why does she always ask me to handle these chores? I’m not the only person in this department.” Resentment can lead to malingering or defection.

You can avoid this problem by balancing the assignment of tasks seen as tedious or difficult with tasks and projects that spark staff interest, are enjoyable, and gain them recognition by others. Split tasks or projects seen as dirty work among more than one staff member as well as yourself to promote a sense of shared responsibility for jobs seen as boring or unpleasant. Seek input from your staff as to the types of assignments they find interesting and challenging.

Control, Monitoring, and Feedback

The biggest challenge for the delegating manager is to ensure that the subordinate does not fail. The best way to do that is to maintain an adequate level of control by providing target completion dates and regular monitoring of progress. When you say, “I want this done by next Friday,” you are maintaining control of the work, which is your duty as manager. When you add that “I’d like to meet with you on Wednesday afternoon, just to see how you’re progressing and to discuss any problems,” you are monitoring the delegated assignment. Monitoring provides opportunities to give coaching and feedback, another key responsibility of every manager.

Depending on the number and complexity of assignments you've delegated, you may use an assignment log to track all projects, tasks, or functions within your department. Other managers use large wall calendars to keep track of delegated assignments and to give a visual sense of progress. Still others require periodic written status reports to keep up-to-date on the assignments they have delegated.

In monitoring, be alert to early signs of trouble. When your subordinate hits an impenetrable barrier or begins to fall behind, intervention may be necessary. Of course, you don't want to solve every problem that you've delegated to others—and which they have accepted. Doing so would defeat your purpose. So use coaching, encouragement, and added resources as you see fit to help them help themselves. Provide this support without being intrusive, especially for subordinates who are committed to learning how to handle things by themselves, and without dictating the "right way." Remember that accomplishing the task is more important than your idea of *how* it should be accomplished.

After-Action Review

Use completed assignments as opportunities for learning—for both you and your subordinate. The two of you should evaluate what went right, what went wrong, and how things might have been done differently or better. In addition,

- ask for the employee's opinion about how this delegation worked for him or her;
- recognize the employee's achievements and provide positive reinforcement for tasks done well;
- use the experience to support the employee's growth through ongoing coaching or additional training as needed.

You should also ensure that your employee is recognized for his or her good work, not only by you, but by peers, your manager, and customers, as appropriate.

Tips for Delegating Effectively

- Recognize the capabilities of your staff.
- Focus on results—let go of any urge to dictate how tasks should be accomplished.
- Use delegation to develop the skills of your staff or to position people favorably with senior management.
- Always delegate to the lowest possible level.
- Explain assignments clearly and provide the resources needed for successful completion.
- Provide feedback to your staff and support them through their mistakes.

Summing Up

- If you are overwhelmed with work and your subordinates are not, you need to do more delegating. If the tasks you delegate are done poorly or late, you need to become a more effective delegator.
- Effective delegators have several things in common. Among them are: being clear in what they want done, delegating both tedious and stimulating tasks, and careful monitoring.
- It is usually best to delegate responsibility for an entire job to one person. That invests ownership of the job in a single person.
- Don't delegate tasks that are clearly your responsibility—that's not delegation, it's abdication.
- Use a face-to-face meeting when you delegate—and always give sufficient authority and resources to get the job done.
- Monitor and be ready to intervene if the delegatee gets off track.
- Use an after-action review to learn from the delegating experience.

Notes

Chapter 4

1. This chapter is based on the “Delegating” module of Harvard ManageMentor, an online product of Harvard Business School Publishing.

Harvard Business Essentials

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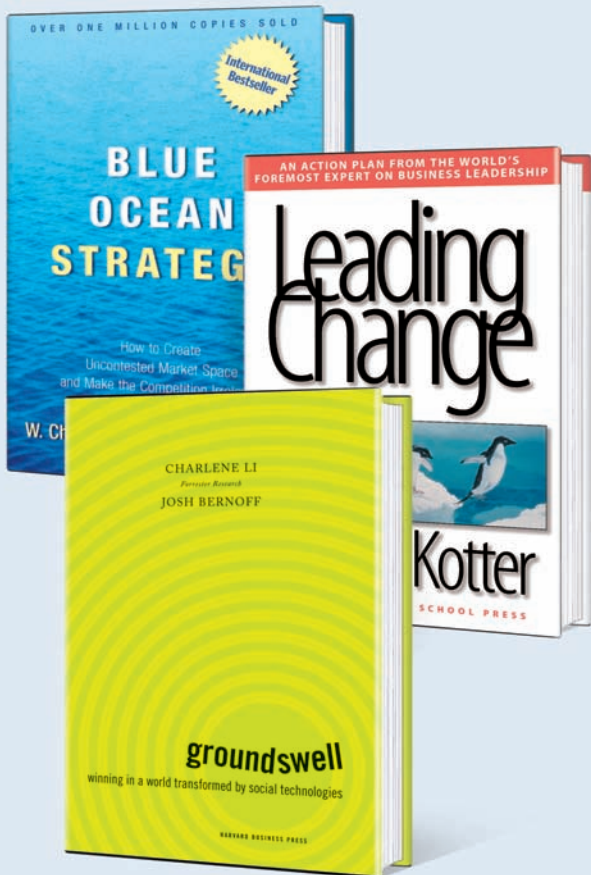
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