

How to Delegate

by Margaret Spencer Dixon, Esq.

If you have trouble delegating work to others, you're in excellent company. As recorded in the 18th chapter of Exodus, the same problem plagued Moses. Moses insisted on judging every dispute arising among his people until his father-in-law, Jethro, convinced him to manage his time more effectively by training others to judge the simple cases, leaving Moses free to focus on the difficult ones.

As Moses must have discovered, effective delegation is a valuable investment of time and energy. While it takes time initially to identify people willing and able to do the job and to train them to do it well, there's ultimately a point at which the time invested in delegating becomes less than the time it would have taken to do the task yourself. Besides freeing up your time for other important tasks, thoughtful delegation makes the fullest use of your organization's personnel, promotes your employees' professional development, and makes your organization a more satisfying place to work.

Here are ten tips to help you become a more effective delegator:

1. **Decide which tasks to delegate.** Triage your to-do list. Eliminate tasks of marginal value, retain tasks that only you can do, and consider delegating everything else, including tasks that you, currently, can do faster or better than your employees. Ask your employees which tasks they think can be abbreviated or eliminated and which they are interested in taking on. Don't keep a project for yourself just because you enjoy doing it. If *you* find a task challenging, rewarding, or just plain fun, chances are your employees will too.
2. **Plan.** Take the time to think a project through carefully before you delegate it. Clarifying your own thoughts first allows you to communicate them clearly to others.
3. **Clearly communicate the project's objectives and parameters.** Minimize the risk inherent in

delegating by providing adequate information and training up-front and making sure your delegatee understands your expectations. Otherwise, you risk frequent interruptions for clarification, or, worse, a result that is not at all what you had in mind.

4. **Delegate sufficient authority.** Delegating responsibility for a project without granting the requisite decision-making authority is unfair. Give the delegatee enough authority to complete the project at the level you expect without needing continuing input from you.
5. **Avoid micromanaging.** There's more than one way to accomplish almost everything, so give delegates latitude to use their own creativity and methods within the parameters you have communicated. One of the goals of delegation is to develop your employees by requiring them to expand their decision-making and problem-solving skills, and this can be accomplished only when you allow them the freedom to do so. Express your confidence in delegates' judgment and ability to complete projects successfully. Intervene only if you sincerely believe that the ultimate success of a project is at risk.
6. **Negotiate deadlines.** Don't insist on a specific due date unless the matter is truly urgent. Whenever possible, have the delegatee commit to a due date of his or her own choosing. Tell the delegatee that you must be informed of any proposed revisions to the due date as soon as possible, and certainly in advance of – not on or after – the due date itself. Consider scheduling frequent informal oral progress reports to ensure that the project stays on track.
7. **Be organized.** Develop and use a simple form to keep track of delegated tasks. Include a brief description of the project, the delegatee, the date on which you delegated the project, the scheduled follow-up date(s), the due date, the actual completion date, and your comments regarding the quality of the result. In addition, record the follow-up dates on your calendar or tickler sys-

tem, ideally in the presence of the delegatee. Saying "Let me just make a note on my calendar" is an effective way of ensuring that both you and the delegatee will remember your agreement.

8. **Leave room for mistakes.** Allow for the honest errors that invariably occur during the course of any creative or innovative endeavor. Weigh the costs of such errors against the benefits of letting employees learn from their mistakes. Focus on solving any resulting problems rather than on chastising the person who made the mistake. Ask the employee for suggestions about how to reduce the risk of having the mistake recur. Create an environment that encourages employees to bring mistakes and problems out in the open in enough time to correct or solve them.
9. **Train employees to solve problems.** Be available for guidance and assistance in brainstorming, but steer delegatees towards resolving minor problems on their own. For major problems, request that the delegatee analyze the situation and provide recommendations regarding the best way to resolve it.
10. **Give feedback.** Give feedback promptly, praising the positive aspects of the project and providing constructive criticism on areas that could stand improvement.

In short, delegate to your employees the way you'd like your boss to delegate to you.

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