Decision Making And Problem Solving

8 Ways Leaders Delegate Successfully

by Deborah Grayson Riegel

August 15, 2019, Updated November 16, 2023

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Summary.   For many leaders, delegating feels like something they know they should do, but don't do. Senior leaders often struggle with knowing what they can delegate that would actually feel helpful to them, or how to delegate responsibility and not just tasks, or what responsibilities could serve as a learning and growth opportunity for others below them. Before leaders can successfully and effectively delegate, they need to understand their own resistance. Perhaps they're reluctant to delegate because they don't want to give up control, or they don't want to look like they're slacking. For the senior leader to start delegating and stick with it, he needs to address these feelings, challenge his own assumptions about "what if," and try small, low-risk delegation experiments to see whether his assumptions are rooted in the truth or in his own desire for safety. Delegating well helps leaders maximize their resources, ensuring that they're focusing on their highest priorities, developing their team members, and creating a culture where delegation isn't just expected — it's embedded in the culture.   **close**

In their book, *Hidden Value: How Great Companies Achieve Extraordinary Results with Ordinary People*, authors Jeffrey Pfeffer and Charles O'Reilly claim that there is mounting evidence that delegating more responsibility for decision making increases productivity, morale, and commitment, all of which impact company culture. A 2015 Gallup study of the entrepreneurial talents of 143 CEOs on the Inc. 500 list showed that companies run by executives who effectively delegate authority grow faster, generate more revenue, and create more jobs.

According to John C. Maxwell, author of *Developing the Leaders Around You*, "If you want to do a few small things right, do them yourself. If you want to do great things and make a big impact,

learn to delegate."

Yet, for many leaders, delegating feels like something they know they should do, but don't do. And the roadblock often begins at the top. Senior leaders often struggle with knowing what they can delegate that would actually feel helpful to them, or how to delegate responsibility and not just tasks, or what responsibilities could serve as a learning and growth opportunity for others below them. In addition, senior executives (like others in the organization) may not have had role models along the way to show them how to delegate successfully. And, of course, there's a perceived reputational risk. Will delegating make them look like they don't know their stuff, or like they're slacking off themselves?
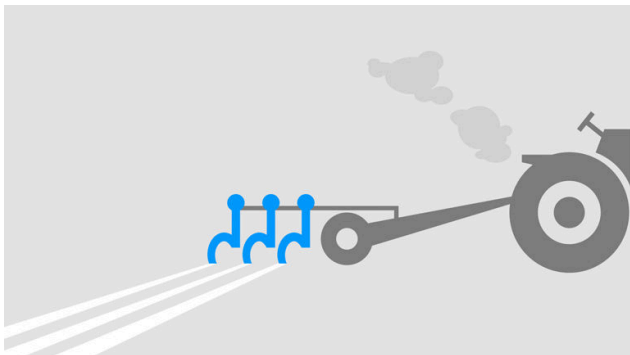
When the senior leaders of an organization can't or won't delegate, the culture suffers. In his book, *The Art of Being Unreasonable*, author, philanthropist, and billionaire CEO Eli Broad writes, "The inability to delegate is one of the biggest problems I see with managers at all levels."

How to Beat Procrastination
by Caroline Webb

Before leaders can successfully and effectively delegate, they need to understand their own resistance. In *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization*, Harvard Graduate School of Education professors Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey suggest that leaders state their goal and then describe the behaviors that are stalling their efforts. For instance, a senior sales leader might want to delegate follow-up calls to big customers to their sales team, but realizes that they haven't updated her notes in the CRM database, or they might simply be in the habit of making the follow-up calls before members of the team can get to them.

Kegan and Lahey then suggest that leaders examine these behaviors and ask themselves how they'd feel if they did the opposite. What if updating the CRM database in a timely manner meant pushing off other, more important activities? What if not calling customers meant that they felt ignored or disrespected, and they took their business elsewhere? These concerns activate the "emotional immune system," which tries to ward off feelings of fear, overwhelm, loss of control, and disappointment. For senior leaders to start delegating and stick with it, they need to address these feelings, challenge their own assumptions about "what if," and try small, low-risk delegation experiments to see whether their assumptions are rooted in the truth or in a desire for safety. In addition, team members to whom tasks are delegated should undertake a similar process in order to identify

their concerns and challenge their own assumptions about what might happen if they take on new tasks, roles, and responsibilities.

Once a leader has begun to shift their mindset, it's time to start shifting behaviors. In my own work as a leadership coach, I have identified eight practices of leaders who delegate successfully:

1. They pick the right person — and it isn't always about who *can* do it. Who needs to develop these skills? Who has capacity? Who has shown interest? Who is ready for a challenge? Who would see this as a reward? Successful delegators also explain why they chose the person to take on the task.

2. They're clear about what the person is responsible for and how much autonomy they have. In *Drive: The Surprising Science About What Motivates Us,* Daniel Pink writes that people often want autonomy over task, team, technique, and time. Successful delegators let their team members know exactly where they have autonomy and where they don't (yet).

3. They describe the desired results in detail. This includes setting clear expectations about the outcome ("what it is"), how the task fits into the bigger picture ("why we're doing

it"), and criteria for measuring success ("what it should look like when done well").

4. They make sure that team members have the resources they need to do the job, whether it's training, money, supplies, time, a private space, adjusted priorities, or help from others.

5. They establish checkpoints, milestones, and junctures for feedback so that they neither micromanage nor under-lead.

6. They encourage new, creative ways for team members to accomplish goals. It's important for delegators to set aside their attachment to how things have been done in the past, so that they can invite, recognize, and reward novel approaches that work.

7. They create a motivating environment. Successful delegators know when to cheerlead, coach, step in, step back, adjust expectations, make themselves available, and celebrate successes.

8. They tolerate risks and mistakes, and use them as learning opportunities, rather than as proof that they shouldn't have delegated in the first place.

Delegating well helps leaders maximize their resources, ensuring that they're focusing on their highest priorities, developing their team members, and creating a culture where delegation isn't just expected — it's embedded in the culture.

[Editor's Note: We have updated the pronouns in this article to be gender neutral.]

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