

Delegating Well

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Everything is created twice, first mentally, then physically. Understanding this truth is the key to delegating well.

As the leader, your job with “delegation” is to think through all your expectations, then ensure that they are communicated fully and clearly understood. This is the mental creation. Only if the leader is able to create a clear mental image of desired expectations can another person be successful with the physical creation. Here is a listing of areas that usually cover the mental creation adequately.

Expected Results. Clarity of the desired outcome is the most important contribution to successful delegation. Ask someone to execute a task or responsibility only after you’ve become very clear on what you desire and why. And when you share your expectations, create an environment where the individual feels comfortable asking questions, both initially and any time thereafter. The clearer the desired outcome is understood, the more likely that result will be achieved.

Boundaries/Guidelines. A common mistake in delegating is to dictate the methods by which the task is to be accomplished. In some rare instances, the process may indeed be critical, but this is often just a personal preference. It is usually better to engage the individual’s creativity and unique talents in executing the task as he or she chooses.

On the other hand, there are usually boundaries to be considered. For example, there may be relevant laws, or there may be guidelines established to ensure uniformity across the company. Methods attempted in the past may have failed dismally. These should be spelled out clearly so that the person assuming the responsibility knows what the boundaries are within which he or she is free to act.

WIIFM and DITM. “What’s in it for me?” is an implied question in delegation. Everyone knows there are beneficial consequences—to the individual, to the boss, to the organization—if delegated work is done well. Is there the potential for a promotion, a pay raise, advanced training, or some other worthy recognition if the delegated responsibility is performed well? Consider realistically what beneficial exposure to other leaders in the organization might accrue to the person assuming this responsibility. Discussing all this openly on the front-end establishes a freedom and honesty that will benefit both boss and direct report.

Acknowledge the potential consequences of poor execution, too. Depending on the individual and the work being delegated, “does it threaten me?” may be a bigger consideration than “what’s in it for me?” Everyone realizes that with responsibility comes the risk of failure, and there is a price for poor performance. Honestly acknowledging the downside, without excessive threat, creates health in the relationship and realistic expectations from the beginning.

Resources. Often leaders assume the individual accepting the responsibility knows what money, people, space, material, and time is available, but this is rarely true. Forethought and clear communication of the availability and limitation of these resources—and how to access them—gives the receiving person clarity, allowing focus on accomplishing the task, not guessing or scrambling.

Accountability. This expectation is often overlooked completely. Every person accepting responsibility knows that there will be an accounting of his or her work at some time and in some way. Think through what you expect here, and make your expectations clearly known. To whom will progress be reported? How frequently? Is there a desired format? How much detail is desired? If the person assuming the responsibility knows this expectation in advance, he or she can organize time and resources to meet and exceed the expectations. But we’ve all known the fear of having the boss ask for a status report at a time when we are not yet prepared.

The key to successful delegation is thinking through the mental creation and communicating it clearly. Then the person assuming the execution responsibility can have a complete and realistic understanding of expectations prior to putting effort against the physical creation.