

When I distributed this article, a colleague sent this comment---a very beneficial addition.

“In my experience, when the delegator provides “drive-by delegation,” (s)he often believes that the individual is already familiar enough with the subject, OR the delegation ground rules are intuitively obvious, OR the individual is resourceful enough that more elaboration is not required.”

“Even if both the direct report and the boss are comfortable with shorthand delegations, a reinforcing follow-up from the delegator--in writing to the delegatee--would be helpful. The memo is a way of going on record stating (in expanded form) what was requested, and it is an excellent opportunity to share assumptions about expectations, resources, boundary conditions, etc. The person receiving the delegation can then review the expectations at his/her convenience and reply with any questions or needed clarifications--or with confirmation of understanding and acceptance.”

I agree with the above thoughts. In addition, the delegatee can take a few moments and jot down what he or she has understood from what little has been shared. Once on paper, even in sketchy form, the gaps of missing information begin to present themselves, and you can ask about them. Most bosses are very willing to spend another couple of moments with someone who holds a piece of paper and says, “I think I have what you told me, but let me take just a moment and confirm all this.” Then start going over what you have. I can almost guarantee you’ll walk away with a few nuggets of additional information, a few “watch-outs,” and likely at least one “and don’t forget about ...!”

Dennis Hooper

Winning Over a Boss Who Delivers “Drive-By Delegation”

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Over the past few weeks, a few people have complained to me about “drive-by delegation” from a boss! If you don’t know what that is, you’ve probably never had a boss toss you a major project in a brief hallway conversation.

Many individuals have told me over the years that their bosses are not particularly good at clearly expressing what they want when they assign a task or responsibility. My purpose with this article is to help you obtain that clarity.

The key is to accept the assignment graciously, but insist on making sure you know exactly what’s being asked of you. That means you might have to extend the conversation a little longer than the boss may have originally expected. If you don’t have that kind of relationship with your boss already, it may feel briefly like you’re making a pest of yourself.

Work through that awkward feeling, realizing that once you know clearly the task ahead of you, you’ll be much better prepared to make something good happen! By insisting that a little extra front-end time is spent, both your boss and you will be far more pleased when the task is accomplished.

Your boss may push back at you, of course, and tell you, “Go get to work!” Remain firm in saying, “If you want me to do a good job, I need to know a little bit more about what you want.” Then start immediately asking these questions.

“What exactly is your desired outcome?” What do you want to accomplish with this effort? How does this initiative link with our organization’s mission, vision, business plan, and goals?”

Clarity of the desired outcome is perhaps the most important information you should obtain when accepting a delegation. The clearer you understand the expected outcome, the more likely you’ll be able to achieve the desired result.

“Are there any guidelines or boundaries I need to honor?” What are the possible limitations, boundaries, and "sacred cows" that I need to consider and not violate? Are there safety, quality, cost, or procedural standards to follow? Are there some "politics" which require sensitivity?"

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 you know what the boundaries are within which you are free to act.

“What resources are available to help?” How much time, money, and space are available to support this effort? How many people are available and how do I gain access to them? Are there technical resources such as books, tools, software, internet sites, experienced instructors, etc.?"

“How should I keep you informed of progress?” Do you prefer a specific format? How frequently and how detailed do you want my reports? Is there anyone else I should keep informed?"

By learning this in advance, you can keep your boss (and important allies, suppliers, or customers) routinely informed rather than your boss having to check up on you. And you won't be caught by surprise by your boss saying, "Well, what's the status?" You'll be able to prepare your update report at your pace and without a lot of pressure--and build relationships with others who want to know.

“What are the potential consequences if this effort fails?” What you'd really like to know is "What's in it for me?" but that's a little on the blunt side. You might also want to know "What's in it for our business and for our customers."

I realize all this may be too extensive to remember. For that reason, I've generated a one-page form containing this information in an organized format. It's a great tool for training your boss (and for using when you are preparing to delegate to your direct reports)! The form was developed from Stephen Covey's "Win/Win Performance Agreement" in his book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.

I'd be happy to provide a copy of the form to you. Just send an e-mail or call me and I'll send the document to you right away.

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