



Delegation

(Or is it easier just to do it myself?)

A View from Impact Factory

Robin Chandler and Jo Ellen Grzyb

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Delegation

This has got to be one of the hardest things new managers find it to do.

Actually, a lot more experienced managers also find it difficult to do.

As do project managers, team leaders, colleagues, well, just about everyone, really.

So why is that? Why is asking someone else to do something just so d**n hard?

Here are some reasons we've noticed or heard over the years:

- I think I have to know it all and be able to do it all myself
- They're never going to do it as well as I do
- I'm not good at explaining things
- I don't find it easy to let go of control
- When I do explain things 'they' don't seem to get it as quickly as I do
- I don't trust 'them' to do it
- I don't trust them to do it well
- It's too frustrating watching someone else struggle with something I can do twice as fast
- They're going to make mistakes
- What if they actually do it better than I?
- What if they really mess up?
- What if they refuse?
- What if it looks really different from what I had in mind?

Each one of those reasons is valid in a way, in that any one of them might happen. The problem is when you let your reasons or anxieties get in the way of delegating things to others.

Now, we're sure you know the benefits of delegating, but just in case you need a reminder, here are a few:

- It shares the work load and can free you up for other things
- The weight on your shoulders gets less
- Other people learn to take on more responsibility
- Other people can learn new skills
- It can be used to help your team work together more effectively
- It can stretch your own management skills
- It can build trust
- It makes others feel valued
- Mistakes actually help people learn
- Two (or three or four) heads are better than yours
- When it works life becomes a lot easier for everyone
- You won't have to run around like a blue-a**ed whastit trying to get everything done on time (in other words, less stress)

OK, OK, Impact Factory, you've got a point. But if I'm not good at delegating, where do I begin?

They really aren't going to do it your way

Since you know that it (whatever 'it' is) isn't going to be done the way you do it, you are going to have to lower your own standards and get in tune with your colleagues' standards. What might help you here is to set a standard below which no one goes, no matter how differently all of you do things.

Here's an example from Impact Factory: we (Jo Ellen and Robin) no longer handle enquiries that come in to the company on a daily basis. We are sometimes brought in after that have initially been dealt with, but we delegated that task to our highly efficient home team. Now, they aren't going to handle those enquiries the way we did; their emails will be worded differently; their telephone conversations won't sound like us either.

We've had to let go of wanting things to look and sound like we do. It was very tempting to say to our staff, "You need to say this, or write this way, when you communicate to clients." But we didn't.

What we did do, however, was set some guidelines that we expect everyone to follow as much as is humanly possible. For instance, one of them is that every enquiry is responded to the day it comes in. It may not be dealt with as thoroughly as would be desirable, but if there's a lot going on sometimes that just isn't possible. But then the response might be simply to let the enquirer know someone will deal with them in full the following day.

There's nothing complicated about this kind of delegation: letting our colleagues develop their own 'voice' while working within some clear parameters. That way our standards are maintained without our breathing down everyone's necks making sure they do it our way.

The difficulty might actually only be in how we feel about it because it isn't a replica of us.

And that's what you'll have to get over as well: every person has their own 'voice' or approach or perspective on how they tackle work. One of the greatest skills any manager can have is allowing people to have their own 'way' while achieving what needs to be done.

Yes, but it's quicker if I just do it

No question about it; it is definitely quicker if you just do it. That's because whatever 'it' is, you've probably been doing it for a while, or you may simply work at lightening speed to get things done.

That shouldn't stop you taking the time to explain, teach, and coach others to do some of your work.

Here's where patience comes in - a double dose of it, please. First, you have to show someone something new, which means that all that information about it which is in your head eventually has to be in the head of the other person. Not all at once! Give someone the big picture so they understand the why, but don't pile it all on and expect them to take it all in, in one go (or two or even three goes).

Bite size, bite size!

Second, when someone is being given something new to do, unless they are just a plain layabout, most people want to do well, want to impress and show they're up to the job. That tends to be why they might mess up more in the beginning: their desire to please may make them believe they can take on more than they can chew, and they can't.

Something that seems so clear and logical to you as you're explaining it, may sound like gobbledygook to the person you're saying it to. So you need to get more than just a nodding head when you explain it. Have them repeat it back in their own words ("So what you're saying is...") so you have clear verification that they not only heard what you said, but they understood it as well.

They're going to make mistakes

Oh boy are they going to make mistakes. Everyone does when they learn something new. That's why we made a big deal about being patient.

You can deal with mistakes in any number of ways.

Try this: "You idiot! That's not what I told you to do. Weren't you listening to a word I said?"

Pretty effective, no?

OK, we're exaggerating, but often that's what you might be thinking and feeling inside when someone botches something up.

And often, even if you don't say those words, your body language might convey a similar message.

It is a cliché, but mistakes really do help people learn. Earlier this year one of our Associates in Training went along to a potential client meeting that we all felt he was up to. It was a disaster! They were unhappy with him, he was unhappy with them, we didn't get the work - it was a mistake.

Did we fall about moaning and wailing about it? No, we did not (well, our poor Associate did a pretty good job of beating himself up) - we had a meeting where we looked at what happened, gave guidance for future meetings, took responsibility for not giving him more backup, and the guy is flying now. Not only did he reach Partner status double-quick, he's probably our best client developer right now.

If we hadn't let him loose, and we hadn't been OK about his 'mistake' we could have knocked his confidence even more than he himself had already knocked it. Instead, we showed our utter confidence in him and his abilities and we were proved right.

What you do have to pay attention to is if someone makes repeated mistakes in the same way. Then you have to see what the bigger issue might be.

Do they really and truly just don't get it?

Are they not capable?

Do they simply not like what they've been asked to do and are consciously or unconsciously sabotaging their ability to get it done?

Do you need to find a completely different way to teach them?

Do you need to get someone else to help explain it?

Monitoring

Just giving someone something new to do and leaving them to do it might work for some people, but not usually. At the same time you don't want to be hovering too much, checking up on how they're doing. Achieving a good balance is essential.

When you initially give somebody something new, you probably need to agree what would be helpful to them but also reassuring for you. It's silly being worried and anxious about how they're getting on by trying to be too hands-off. You can even say to the other person: "I get pretty anxious about involving someone new in this work, so it would be helpful if you gave me an update on a regular basis." And then decide what that regular basis would look like.

Monitoring also means keep other people informed from your end on a regular basis: what you expect, how things are shaping up within the big picture, if any of the goal posts have changed (they inevitably will).

Praise

Oddly enough, this bit often gets left off.

We remember one person who worked with us who never ever praised his staff. When this was pointed out to him, he said, "They're doing what they're paid to do, why do they need praise? The pay cheque is praise enough. If they do above and beyond, well, then I might give them some."

Well, that's certainly one attitude. Not one we endorse however. We believe that people need to be acknowledged even if what they do is all part of their job description. In order to get people to want to do above and beyond it's got to be worth their while and we're not talking money here. We're talking about letting others know that you notice their work, that you think they're doing a good job, that even the day-to-day stuff is important and you appreciate how they're handling it.

When you give someone something new to do, it's doubly important to let him or her know that you appreciate the effort they're making. This is one of the ways you build trust; the more you trust their work, the more they will develop, and delegating will be that much easier for you.

For us, success is not just when you delegate something to someone and they do it well. Success is when they start coming to you asking for new things to be given

The Delegatee

So far, everything we've talked about has been about the 'delegator'

Those that are delegated to - the 'delegatee' if you will - should have a few words of wisdom as well (well, we think they're words of wisdom!).

If you see something you'd like to get involved in, ask. Don't wait to be invited because you might wait forever and then feel resentful you weren't included. Sometimes other people just don't know you're interested or even that you already have or are willing to learn the expertise needed.

If it looks as though you have a boss who's reluctant to let go, think about what you'd need to do to reassure him/her that you're up to the task. It's no good just saying "I can do that" if you work with someone who thinks no one can do it as well.

When you are given something new to do, don't pretend you're up to the job if a million and one questions are dancing in your head and you have a slight feeling of panic (or even a big feeling of panic). Ask questions! As many as you need to be able to do the job well.

Remember this if you can: often people will give instructions that they can understand and they make the assumption that you'll be able to understand them as well. If you don't, and you sit there nodding your head as though you do, you'll soon be out of your depth. This is true whether someone has explained something to you once or five times. If you don't understand, ask again.

Now there are ways of asking that won't make you seem as though you're not capable. Here are a few of our favourites:

It would be great if you could go over all that again. I got some of it, but I need more clarification about xxx.

You're clearly know everything there is to know about this project. I'm just starting so maybe you should treat me as a real beginner.

I don't want to seem out of my depth, but it would be really helpful if you could explain that part over again.

I'm going to repeat back to you what you just said, so you can make sure I've really got it.

Oh dear, I'm afraid that just didn't sink in, could you try again?

I can see you're getting a bit frustrated, but once I crack this you won't have to explain it again.

And so on. There is nothing wrong with asking and then asking again. The delegator might appear or even be exasperated, but this could be about learning something completely new, and there's nothing wrong in wanting to get it right.

You will make mistakes.

Own up to them right away, and we mean right away. Don't hide, pretend, blame someone else, put it off. The sooner you 'fess up' the sooner it can be put right. Unless you're damn sure you can fix it without help, call in the troops. It can feel might lonely and isolating sitting there knowing you've screwed up and hoping no one will notice while you scrabble around trying to put it right. There are wiser heads out there who will have seen it all before anyway.

Yes, but what if they end up giving me all the duff jobs?

Ah yes, you might have a boss who just wants to get rid of all the dull, time-consuming stuff he/she doesn't want to do. These people aren't reluctant at all, they're just waiting to pounce and give you piles of boring things to do so their time is freed up.

This is an interesting one. On the one hand you don't want to seem difficult and on the other you don't want your own day filled with the dull and boring.

Offer a compromise. Show willing with the dull stuff but ask for something more interesting as well. Not only that, we believe that everyone needs some boring, routine things to do, especially in the 'slump' part of the day (Jo Ellen: "I seem to 'cave' at about 3pm and am quite happy to sink into mindless work for a bit that requires not a single creative brain cell.") where you don't have to think too much.

If it looks as though that's all that's coming your way, you can point out that you want to develop skills and are certainly able to take on more challenging work.

Find your own way.

Once you've got the hang of something new, you don't have to be a clone of the person who gave it to you to do. Though they might like you to do everything 'their way', sometimes you may find a better or more efficient way. Sometimes when things have been done the same way for a long time, the routine takes over and new ways of doing things get ignored.

One of the plusses of being delegated to is that you might see things in a completely new way and change the routine. Indeed, fresh eyes usually will see things that 'old' eyes just can't.

Conclusion

As far as we're concerned, delegating is an essential part of any manager's role. Done well it empowers people (see also our document on Empowerment), raises self-esteem, gives people new skills and frees up your own time and energy.

Give it away!

**If you are interested in talking to us further about our work on Delegation,
please phone: 020 7226 1877 or e-mail: enquiries@impactfactory.com**