

Have You Mastered the Rare Art of Successful Delegation?

by Claudia A. Monte

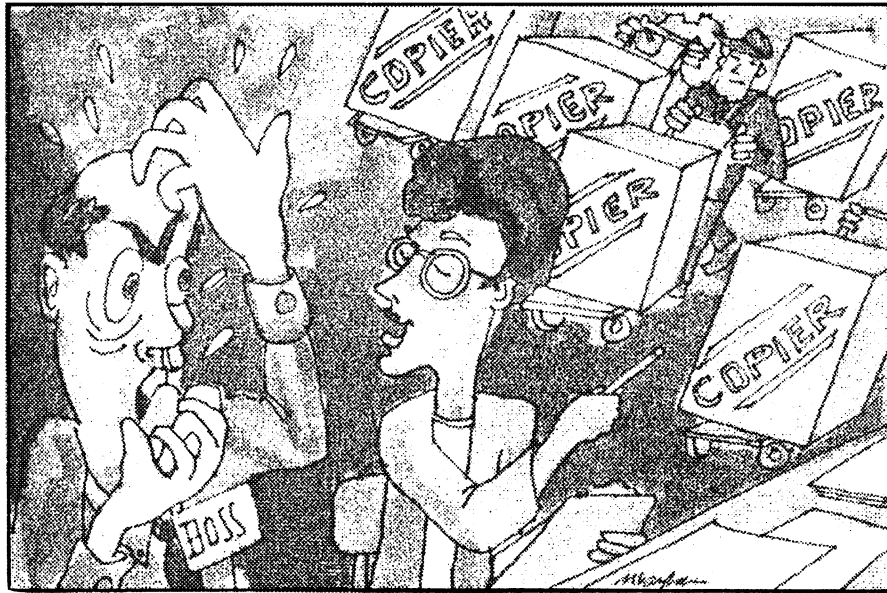
Every manager has to get work done through others. According to Webster's dictionary, that act—"assigning responsibility or authority" to somebody else—is the definition of the word "delegate." Delegating work may sound easy in theory, but in practice it is one of the toughest tasks executives face. Unless managers master the art of delegation, they are failing in their jobs.

Why are so many managers poor at delegating? The answer usually lies in three reasons: fear, lack of time and insecurity. Some executives make such statements as, "No one else can do this job" or "Others may make mistakes" or "I don't have the time to train anyone" or "I can do it faster than teach someone else to do it" or "I don't feel comfortable asking somebody to do something for me."

Those excuses are used by executives when they have failed to delegate. Examine the circumstances surrounding these statements and none of them stands up to scrutiny. Executives who refuse to delegate and hide behind such excuses should be asked, "How did you learn?" Someone, at one point, took the time to give them assignments, let them make mistakes, explained how to correct them, and let them do it again. They should do the same with employees but they do not—or temperamentally cannot.

The reason why many managers fail at delegation is because the art—and it is an art—takes time and patience to learn. They should approach it as a motivational tool for themselves as well as employees. When a manager succeeds at delegating tasks, growth is achieved in two ways: employees learn new responsibilities and the manager gets more time to concentrate on other, more challenging issues. The company as a whole benefits because delegation enhances the organization's skill level.

When delegation is badly handled, it becomes a source of frustration. Why? The main reasons are poor communication and lack of specific instructions. Many people cannot ask questions easily. They don't know what questions to ask, and they may also be afraid of appearing stupid.



Studies have shown that the retention rate for listening is only 25%. This means out of every four instructions a manager gives, only one may be accurately retained.

Executives should also pay close attention to body language while assigning tasks. If they keep looking at their watch or are ready to run out the door, they are sending the message that they do not have the time for questions or further clarification. The communication process has stopped.

Executives who want to master delegation should take these steps:

- Explain the importance of the assignment.
- Set specific performance standards for tasks.
- Clarify goals and objectives.
- Provide information and resources for the job.
- Obtain feedback on a regular basis.
- Demonstrate support and offer guidance.
- Give credit when it is due.

Executives who delegate encourage independence, but never lose accountability. To ensure understanding, they should be explicit in their directions. A funny but true story is often told of an executive who asked his secretary for 40 xeroxes, and sat

with his mouth open a couple of days later when 40 Xerox copiers were wheeled into the office. Managers should make sure the employee understands the details of the assignment and restates or writes down what needs to be done.

An important part of effective delegation is the follow-up process. The last thing a manager wants to see on deadline day is a disastrous job by an employee. To prevent unpleasant surprises, executives should monitor the job as it progresses. Most people want to do the work well and will respond favorably to feedback. Never wait until an assignment is completed and then tell the person handling the job that it is not what was required. This results in frustration, poor morale and damages a working relationship.

Successful delegation multiplies the output of managers as soon as the efforts of others achieve results. Though delegating tasks may initially take time, over the long run it offers a big payoff in terms of time saved.

Watch out for so-called reverse delegation. It occurs when a manager has delegated a task, and an employee brings it back with a question or problem. The manager cannot answer the question readily, and

so asks the employee to leave it on his or her desk. Who now has the task? The manager does. To avoid this happening executives should tell employees, "Don't bring me problems; bring me solutions." This encourages employees to be creative and develop trouble shooting skills. It also clearly returns the responsibility of completing the task to the employee.

Properly handled, directing the work of others can be a rewarding experience. The keys to successful delegating are clear communication, encouraging questions, constructive feedback and trusting the abilities of subordinates. When managers learn to delegate, they see positive results—a more productive staff, a focused management team, satisfied customers and a healthier bottom line. Try it. Somebody took a chance with you. Now it's your turn. ♦

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