DELEGATION

Mastering a fundamental barrier to leadership and organizational growth

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<u>Delegation</u>

The single most critical leadership skill in growing companies is delegation. The absence of this skill in the CEO or at the executive team level causes more companies to get "stuck" than any other behavior. As hands-on leaders in a smaller organization, executives were able to manage and lead in a variety of ways. These ways simply cease to work once the number of people involved and organizational complexity grows. The good news, however, is that a leader doesn't need to be born with delegation skills; these can be learned through practice. It does, however, require commitment and an effective process to work effectively.

<u>It's A Process</u>

The reason so many executives avoid delegating is because it can feel like abdication and a loss of control. Most executives legitimately believe they can do something faster and better than their subordinates. The problem is that as a leader, the job isn't to *do* things, but rather to *do things through other people and simultaneously develop those people*. While "doing it yourself" can be expedient and justified (based on timing or exposure), it can also be used merely as an excuse for not practicing solid leadership behavior.

By following four simple steps, leaders can turn the mystery of delegation – and their fear of it - into just another business process that reduces risk, and assures timely achievement. The four keys to effective delegation are:

- Pinpoint
- Feedback
- Measurement
- Recognition

<u>Pinpoint</u> – Make sure at the very start that the person you are delegating to *clearly* understands what the goal is. As leaders, we usually think we have defined something clearly - and so even if we do ask the individual if they understand, far too often the person replies that they "get it" - *even if they don't.* This is a formula for failure. You must ensure clear understanding between both parties about exactly what the person is to accomplish, the timeframe, feedback required, etc.

Great leaders know that even after they have explained what they want done and the person has indicated they understand, there is one more key question to ask: "Please repeat back to me what it is that I have just asked you to do." The first time you do this, the person may be a little insulted: "Don't you trust me?" Your answer should be something like "Humor me, just repeat back what it is that you are going to do, so we can be sure we are aligned around the same goal."

After the person repeats it back, you may find that they truly did understand the goal - which is great. But very often, it will be clear that they didn't really understand it the way you intended, and you must take responsibility for that misfire since you were the communicator. Go through it again carefully and when you are finished, again ask the person if they get it. If they say yes, ask them again to repeat back what they understand the goal to be. Sometimes it may take two or three rounds of repeating back to truly gain alignment with your expectations.

> *I once had an excellent administrative assistant who taught me a lot about effective delegation. I would hand her some work to do and before I could even turn to go back to my office she would say "Wait a minute, Boss. Which one of the other 20 priorities you have already given me does this replace, do you want me to work overtime to get it done, or should I lower the quality to get it done? This is a zero-sum game and it is your choice." She knew that we had to have absolute clarity between us or my expectations wouldn't be met. She even created a priority coding system for us so "A" meant I needed it back the same day, "B" meant within three days and "C" meant whenever she got to it. In seven years of working together, we never had a single significant misfire between us.*

Feedback – When you delegate, you do so based on the person's proven ability to handle a task - so people you delegate to don't automatically all get the same length leash. Plus, to reduce risk and maintain control, you need regular feedback while the person is working on whatever the goal is. The frequency and amount of feedback should also be different from person to person - depending on their experience level. So for a very experienced and proven individual, you might ask them to stick their head in your office every three weeks and give you a one minute update on how they are doing. But you might ask a new or less experienced individual to give you a five minute sit-down report every Friday morning. In either case, you should never be satisfied with letting things progress without being able to keep your finger on what is happening. And the person you have delegated to needs to "own" the responsibility to provide feedback to you.

Measurement – People need to clearly understand your risk tolerance for the goal they are working on. They need to understand what kind of things you want and need to hear about, and what is just normal "noise" – or things that you don't need to know about. For those familiar with quality control charts, this is about establishing the boundaries up front. In a typical quality control chart, the boundaries might be ± 2 standard deviations, i.e. anything within those boundaries is noise, but anything outside this is an outlier and important to know about ASAP.

$+2\sigma$ X   X   X   (X)

Goal

-2σ X   X   X   (X)
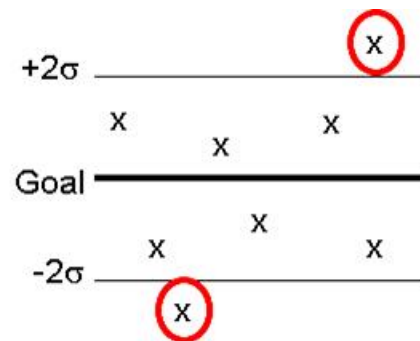
Recognition – When people take on an assignment and do it well, we should publicly recognize what they have done. Remember, the job of leaders is to develop people, and delegating goals is a growth opportunity that helps do that.

> *If your company has a culture of perfection only, i.e. mistakes aren't tolerated, then delegation will not be effective. People won't always get it right, even when following the steps outlined above. But people learn from their mistakes (hopefully), and if something has not gone exactly as desired, you have in front of you a coachable moment. A leader should say something like, "Okay, so this didn't end up exactly on target. If you could go back and start over knowing what you know now, what would you do differently?" As long as the individual can demonstrate that they have given thought to this issue and come up with other approaches, they have grown and hopefully become a stronger contributor. If they have a blank look on their face and no good answer, then you will have to watch that person carefully in the future.*

The only truly fatal behavior regarding delegation is taking something back and doing it yourself. The usual reason for doing this is because expectations weren't pinpointed at the start, and so you get anxious or irritated about the time it is taking or concerned that the person isn't doing it correctly. The reason a leader can never take something back is because it creates terrible feedback to the individual that, "If the boss gives me something to do, if I stall and drag it out long enough he will take it back and do it himself anyway." You can *never* take it back, so it makes step #1, Pinpointing even more critical.

> *Years ago a CEO boss told me that I should add a question to the performance appraisals I did with my subordinates - and that was, "What three things am I doing today that I should delegate to you?" My first reaction was, "What a stupid question! If the person answers it will mean more work for them." But I have employed that question for over 25 years in performance appraisals, and no one has ever not responded. "Boss, I could handle ……" or "You shouldn't be doing ….." are typical responses. Wouldn't that make your life easier; having people step up and take things off your plate? And they themselves are growing in the process!*

The Seven Most Powerful Words for Any Leader

Too often, leaders feel that based on their experience and knowledge, they should know all the answers *and* provide them to their subordinates. This allows subordinates to shirk their responsibilities, and actually in effect, delegate issues upward to their boss! Great bosses understand that they must jealously protect their own agenda, and never let people delegate upwards.

One of the best ways to grow people and improve accountability is by using the seven most powerful words a leader can use. These are, "I don't know; what do you think?" These words work even when you do know the answer, and should be utilized instead of providing the answer. Your subordinates need to understand that it is their job to look at issues, develop alternative solutions, evaluate those solutions and make recommendations for actions. If the boss is going to provide all the answers, why does he need subordinates?

Conclusion

Every leader needs to realize that one of the most critical parts of his job is growing people and his organization, by delegating. The leader who always wants to be hands-on *doing* things will ultimately become a roadblock to the rest of his organization, as it gets larger. And by *doing* rather than delegating, the next level of managers will never grow and be prepared for greater responsibility.

The good news is that like most leadership skills, you don't have to be born with great delegation. By simply following a process and having the discipline not to be an "answer man", a leader can become very skilled at delegation - and more valuable to his organization.

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