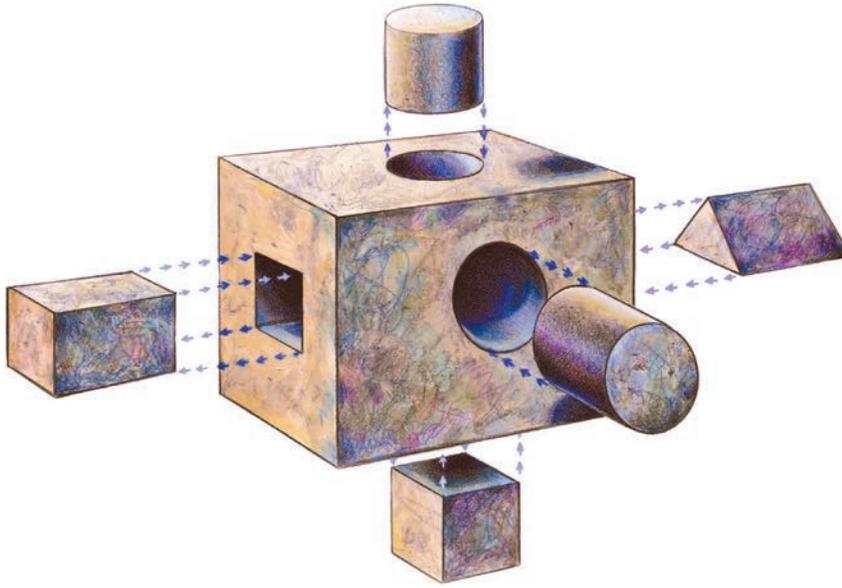


# How Effective Leaders **DELEGATE**



take of early working relationships, some direct report will either seek to consult with the firm leader when they should have simply handled the issue on their own, or they proceeded without consultation when in the eyes of the new leader, they would have wanted input.

What then transpires, is if they sought the leaders input when it was really **not** required, it is rarely brought to their attention. In this case the professional can easily misinterpret the firm leader's responsiveness to mean that he wants involvement on that sort of issue. If, on the other hand, this professional failed to consult when they should have, they will usually elicit corrective feedback. This results in a risk-averse 'if in doubt, check it out' behavioral response pattern. Since the failure to consult is corrected while the seeking unnecessary input is not and may even be (unconsciously) encouraged, the overall result is for more and more issues to reach the firm leader. The leader consequently becomes overloaded, diverted from their more important strategic tasks and feels swamped in trivia.

The most powerful antidote to this pattern is to meet with each of your direct reports and ask of them:

*"Do you ever see me working on tasks that someone who is serving as the firm leader should not need to do? In other words, are there areas where you believe I can delegate some of my responsibilities, help other people grow, and give myself more time to focus on the important strategic and long-term issues facing our firm?"*

One of the key questions that need to be asked of firm leaders is – **"whose work are you doing?"** When any firm leader invests their time in performing administrative or

**I**n discussions with new firm leaders before they formally take on the role, I ask them what they think that they will like doing the most, in other words where are they eager to spend their time. The most common response is: "determining strategic direction and implementation." After being in the job for some months when we come back and have them assess where they have been spending the largest portion of their time, they then confess how it is spent in "day-to-day administrative responsibilities" with absolutely no time for strategic issues. All too often, the urgent crowds out the important.

Whenever I've had the opportunity to follow up with new firm leaders and ask what surprised them the most during their first 100 days in the role and what changes they would make to be more effective if they had the chance to do it all over again, one of the more common responses I elicit is "needing to delegate more."

Delegation is one subject that every firm leader I speak with, has strong opinions about. Some feel that they do it well. Some will quietly admit that they don't even know where to start. Some have experienced a good example of delegation. Some feel like every time someone has

ever "delegated" to them, it felt like they had just been dumped on. Many believe it is something they *should do* more of to be effective; but there are some who resist it with a passion – almost as if they feel that their fingerprints should be found on everything.

In my work with leadership transitions, one of the problems that I will often see arise in the early months of the new leadership is a pattern of misunderstanding between the firm leader and some of the professionals on his or her senior team. The new firm leader will often find a myriad of issues awaiting their attention. In the give and

other less strategic functions that should be done by others, you are overextending yourself in a way that consumes your limited energies. Sometimes you might not be aware of how much of your time is being taken up by routine tasks. Another thing you can do is keep a diary to make this 'routine creep' more visible.

Watch for the warning signs. If you find yourself hoarding work, and working long hours as a result, that may be a classic sign of under-delegating.

## How To Delegate Effectively

Delegating is a skill that needs to be learnt and some leaders can find it difficult. However, learning to delegate is a key competency for being a good firm leader. Here are some basic guidelines to help you delegate more effectively:

### 1. Determine what you will delegate.

You decide which task you want to delegate. Keep in mind that delegating is different from simply assigning someone a task that is already a part of their normal job requirements. When you delegate, you give someone else **one of your job tasks**; but you maintain control and responsibility.

The nature of the task that you are delegating may fall into a number of different categories. For example:

- You may assign someone a task that you want completed in a very specific way. These are tasks that require time and effort but not a great deal of thought.
- You may give someone a topic to research for you. You want this individual to gather the facts, consider various

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approaches, get back to you to discuss their findings and make recommendations on how to proceed. These tasks can be more of a lengthier assignment in that they may require multiple steps and decision points.

- You may make someone a 'project leader' and give them full responsibility and accountability to make decisions, figure out the best course of action and get it done. You provide direction, clarify the end goal and remain available as a resource. But they own the project.

### 2. Determine to whom you will delegate each task

A new firm leader rarely starts with a clean slate. Usually most of your team, especially your C-level professionals, are already in place. So to select that individual on your team who is the right fit, you need to know each team member's temperament, strengths, and interests so that you can best determine who might excel at the task and benefit from doing it. You can either delegate tasks based on the particular in-

dividual's strengths, or you can give your team members a list of tasks and ask who would be interested in the assignment.

I find that the best leaders engage in regular conversations with their C-level professionals about the kind of opportunities each would like to receive. The individual you identify must have the capability to do the work, or it is important for them to be able to learn how to do it. Your discussions can help you determine which professional would be good for this and not the best for that.

It may sound trite but you need to remember that your delegation requires two individuals and a relationship to exist between those individuals. Unless that relationship is based on trust, delegation cannot work. So in selecting the right team member you need to ask yourself: "How confident will I be in delegating authority to this person?" Confidence in the delegatee is a big issue in delegating – if you don't believe the individual is truly able to do the job you need them to do, you may have a bigger problem than a reluctance to delegate. Conversely, good delegation is vital to the leadership development of those you delegate to in your firm.

In order for the person to feel empowered and motivated, they should be given full responsibility and accountability for the task. Only by having ownership of the task will this individual know that you are trusting them to do a good job and thereby have the inspiration and determination to succeed.

### 3. Clarify your expectations and the results you want.

Delegation does not mean passing off or ignoring key aspects of your firm's opera-

tions, and especially if they are composed of areas outside of your expertise. Mastering the art of “managing the inscrutable” is a sine qua non for anyone who takes on the role of being firm leader. You can’t simply leave all matters having to do with technology to your Chief of IT. It is only by investing the time to fully understand the business can you delegate with any confidence. The trick is to delegate what you do understand, not what you don’t.

Delegating is also not simply handing over a task and leaving someone to it, and then expecting them to do it exactly as you would. In general, the individual to whom you delegate uses his or her own methods to accomplish the task. If you expect use of a specific method to accomplish results, relate that to the person at the beginning. You need to determine the results you consider necessary for successful completion of the task.

As you begin, keep in mind that YOU will be the most common reason that your delegation fails. A typical problem occurs when, while you are delegating, you become concerned about not coming across as condescending when explaining the task, so you mistakenly assume the other person knows what you want and that giving too much guidance would be offensive. But, be assured that problems will occur when you hand over any task without clear direction about the standards you expect, the quality, or the timeline for completion. Ideally, it is a good idea to convey this information in the way the person likes to receive it. For example, does this individual absorb information best by verbal or written instructions?

You are going to think that your commu-

nication is clear but it may not be. For example, time means different things to different people. If you want the delegated work completed within a certain period, make that clear. If you say, “When you get time, would you please work on this,” your project may remain untouched for weeks. Also, if you want portions of the work completed by certain dates, make that clear.

After you have given your colleague the information about the delegated task, ask him or her to tell you their understanding of both the task and your goals. If this individual’s answers do not match your expectations, you need to review the matter in detail again.

Delegating effectively also means taking time to explain how this particular task may fit into a bigger picture, perhaps with regard to your or the firm’s business strategy. You should not assume that your colleague will already know this.

You need to understand that if delegation doesn’t work, it is because you haven’t done it right. Did you choose the right person? Did you explain the task and expectations clearly? Did you set clear guidelines and deadlines? Did you schedule review sessions? Did you create an environment of trust that allowed this individual to ask you for clarification and guidance ahead of time?

#### **4. Communicate this individual’s authority over the delegated task.**

Whether you prefer the term leadership or management, it is still about accountability. Though you cannot delegate your personal accountability, you can make others accountable for their results . . . but only if you are willing to give them your authority

– and live with their results.

You need to carefully define the scope and degree of authority given to this individual for completing the delegated task. You need to explain which decisions he or she may make independently, which require consultation with you and which require your sole approval. Be specific. If you tell someone, “Do whatever it takes,” you may end up with an unpleasant surprise.

Alternatively, a too-limited authority may frustrate the individual from accomplishing the task. Provide the authority necessary to accomplish the task but not so much authority that he or she can create a major disaster before anyone discovers the problem. Also, you need to make clear the budget available and any budgetary limitations.

Again, have this individual play back to you his or her understanding of their authority regarding this task. You obviously need to resolve any misunderstandings at the very beginning of the undertaking.

#### **5. Establish a process for follow-up.**

Successful delegation requires a balance of saying “no” to the urges of micromanaging, yet never walking away completely – even though the ultimate responsibility lies with you.

You need to set aside a period of time (perhaps each week) when you will be available to answer questions; but remember to let them know that you are still available if there’s anything urgent. Identify checkpoints from the outset to help you avoid the temptation of constantly looking over shoulders. It is essential to set up these checkpoints to monitor progress and ensure the work is going according

to expectations. Monitoring the progress avoids a discovery two days before the due date that the task is not on schedule. It also can serve as an indication of whether your colleague needs assistance.

Some individuals may hesitate to ask questions or request assistance. They fear that that will be interpreted as a sign of weakness or inadequacy for the job. Follow-up meetings give them the opportunity to ask questions within the context of a meeting designed for that purpose. The frequency of follow-up meetings will vary from project to project. Also, you may need to schedule more frequent meetings when delegating to someone new to your management team versus when delegating to an experienced and proven professional.

To help coordinate your delegated tasks, you should probably have an assistant monitor deadline dates, key deliverables and create metrics that help everyone know if things are on track. You can then incorporate follow-ups on major initiatives into your regular management team staff meetings.

## 6. Recognize the contribution.

Once a task is complete and work is submitted, it is all too easy to immediately move onto the next super-urgent task; only giving an obligatory nod to the work that was done. The danger with this, however, is that you're sending the message that the work is not important and let's face it, no one wants to think their work isn't valued! Take the time to provide acknowledgment when it is due.

The quality of results is likely to vary greatly across different tasks and according to the different people doing them but in all cases it is important to always jointly learn from

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the experience for next time and to offer thanks for the efforts, as well as recognition for a job done well, when it is due.

## When It's A Bad Idea To Delegate

There are some things that new leaders tell me they believe they should not delegate. For example, the firm leader has a special responsibility for the future so assigning to someone else the responsibility of thinking about the firm's strategic direction could put your future at risk. And because your colleagues view your competence often based on the work of your senior team, you should not delegate their selection. Others may help you screen various candidates, but in the end, the final selection must be yours to make.

Beyond these, one of the main areas that I observe leaders getting into trouble with delegating is in the execution or implementation of their strategic initiatives. Whether it is a matter of developing the firm's strategic plan, initiating key client teams, launching a new office, getting the firm's practice groups operating more effectively, the firm leader cannot delegate all aspects of the implementation to others. If

it is truly one of your top strategic priorities your partners expect to see you constantly sticking your nose in, asking the tough questions and tracking the progress of your initiative – otherwise you probably are not going to get any results.

Time and time again when any new firm leader takes active interest in and announces some new initiative that announcement is an endorsement for change and a signal of the leader's priorities. When that same leader is then seen to delegate the initiative and no longer be devoting any further time or attention to the matter, your partners take that as a explicit sign that the stated initiative is no longer a high priority. Even worse, those firm leaders who do this repeatedly are soon seen as either unfocused or gullible victims of the latest management fad.

That all said, successful leaders delegate. The best surround themselves with people on their internal management teams that are smarter than they are and give them room to run with huge responsibilities. The best leaders, says famed ex-GE CEO Jack Welch, “should always err on the side of delegation; and the bigger the enterprise, the more delegation you need to do.” And management sage, Peter Drucker said it as far back as the early 50's: the ability to delegate lies at the heart of leadership.

What are your next steps? When are you getting too involved? Give your direct reports permission to call you out **when you haven't delegated something you should**. And, when do you need to get more involved? Ask yourself these tough questions. Then ask the people who are working with you. Their answers may save your time and increase your leadership effectiveness.