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Delegation is work – but it’s working effectively

Don't let poor delegation skills keep your company from achieving its potential.

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“Before you do anything else, read this newsletter and then report back what you’ve learned.”

There. I’ve successfully delegated an assignment to you. Now all I have to do is sit back and kick up my feet.

Of course, I write that in jest, just to make a serious point. Delegation, while critical to any company’s success, is an activity that requires a proper touch, commitment and focus and ongoing effort.

That’s probably why I often hear clients express frustration over their delegation efforts. It’s a common thread among managers – “I assign tasks but nobody ever does what I ask them to do.”

Robert Half, who made his fame and fortune by founding one of the world’s most successful personnel services, once said of the art of delegation: “Delegating work works, provided the one delegating works, too.”

In other words, delegation is much more than simply handing out assignments and walking away.

Delegation is a way of making the best use of your resources, of giving employees accountability and freedom, of achieving company objectives as a team. It’s about working smart. And working effectively. But it only “works” when the one doing the delegating is serious about managing properly.

Poor delegation costs you money

Why is it important to delegate effectively? First, poor delegation – or lack of delegation – increases the cost

of producing any good or service. In the short term, you may be willing to accept this hit to your bottom line.

Pushing the Right Buttons

Effective delegation includes:

- Clearly defining tasks, including what the end result should look like
- Explaining how the outcome will be judged
- Setting concrete due dates – and don’t say ASAP!
- Following up, including removal of obstacles where necessary and coaching as appropriate
- Providing positive feedback or taking corrective actions if needed

But long-term, your company will either lose customers due to higher prices – and often poorer quality – or you’ll lose profits that should be yours. Either way, you lose.

Now think about your employees. Regardless of whether they are vice presidents or laborers, employees who work in challenging, motivating environments are more productive, more committed to the customer and more likely to achieve personal and corporate goals.

Finally – and this applies especially to small or mid-sized companies without deep infrastructures – poor delegation skills often keep senior people from focusing

on the right issues. For example, the senior executive who spends countless hours researching data or tweaking a Power Point presentation is wasting valuable time that could be spent growing the business.

That executive is costing his company money. The business loses.

Common breakdowns can be prevented

Of course, on some level, everyone understands the importance of proper delegation.

Unfortunately, some managers believe that when they delegate a task, they also give away all responsibility for ensuring that the task gets done.

The reality is that most breakdowns in delegation start with the manager. Why? Delegation often fails because:

- The employee was never told what to do.
- The employee doesn't know how to do it.
- The employee doesn't know why something is important.
- The employee believes another task is of greater importance.
- The employee is under the impression that he or she is doing what is needed!

In these instances and many others, a manager who communicates effectively and follows up as needed can easily solve these problems.

In fact, delegation is actually a three-part process. Step one is defining the task – what is needed, the timeframe, the level of importance, even some suggestions for how to accomplish the work. Step two is following up to make sure the task or project is on track. Step three is taking action to reinforce acceptable performance or correct inadequate performance.

But it's the manager's responsibility to make sure those steps are followed.

Protect the environment!

Perhaps the most important aspect of effective delegation is creating an atmosphere of trust and respect where employees feel comfortable asking questions or developing their own ways of getting work done.

The right environment makes a tremendous difference. And managers can nurture that sense of empowerment by giving their employees the sufficient direction – and freedom – to work independently.

That doesn't mean that following up with employees is negative. In fact, if done properly, follow up can lead to a positive, supportive environment, one where two-way communication creates a collaborative relationship between management and staff.

The key is making sure you don't just bark out orders and walk away. Instead, be sure to provide the information and support your employees need to be successful with the tasks assigned to them.

Don't sabotage your delegation efforts by:

- Failing to provide sufficient information about the task.
- Leaving out critical details such as deadlines or possible obstacles.
- Insisting that employees follow unnecessary steps to produce the finished product.
- Micromanaging every step of the way. Follow-ups should be supportive interactions, not interrogations.
- Failing to provide positive feedback when work is done correctly, or to take action if needed to ensure a proper outcome.

Remember to communicate effectively at each step of the process. Give your employees some freedom and flexibility to pursue tasks their own way. And always follow up in a positive manner, providing insight or coaching tips when needed.

If you have the right focus – and make the right effort – you can get delegation to work for you, too.

More information? If you'd like to learn more about how to make delegation work for you, please send an e-mail to tim@plaidgroup.com, visit our website at www.plaidgroup.com or call us at 713-627-3569. The Plaid Group publishes a free bimonthly e-mail newsletter filled with insights and ideas you can use to enhance your company's operational performance, spur growth and increase bottom-line profits. To subscribe, change your e-mail address or unsubscribe, please visit http://www.plaidgroup.com/newsletters_subscribe.asp.

Author's Note: Tim Smith is a Principal with The Plaid Group. The Plaid Group helps companies simplify and stabilize their business operations to improve financial performance.