



Hay Hill Highlights

Delegation — the art and the science



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Overview

When Google, the search engine, software and advertising giant that employs over 50,000 people, undertook a rigorous data mine of the leadership factors that its staff value, they found that “Empower your team and don’t micromanage” came second in importance out of eight ‘good behaviours’ (beaten only by “providing feedback and being a good coach”).¹ The same message comes through across multiple sectors and organisations - micromanaging is a key contributor to executive derailment.² Learning how to delegate effectively is thus no luxury in business life.

The benefits of effective delegation are pretty clear. For leaders, being a good delegator marks executives out for promotion, as it shows them to be effective operators without anchoring them to their current roles. More specifically, delegation allows executives to spend more time on the activities where they can add the most value and that are critical to their organisations’ success. Occasionally, that can include concentrating on other aspects of operational detail, but invariably includes working on strategy, interacting with their organisations’ customers, suppliers and competitors, coaching their key people, influencing other major stakeholders and networking in their markets.

For those asked to take on tasks, working on properly delegated projects provides opportunities to develop their technical and management skills, to deepen their business networks and relationships, and to enhance their understanding of how what they do fits into their organisations’ wider contexts.

This booklet provides a practical guide for anyone seeking to refresh or refine their delegation skills. Most, possibly all, of the suggestions will be familiar to experienced leaders, but are

¹See Google’s Project Oxygen, conducted in 2011.

²See the extensive research on executive derailment including the original paper ‘*Why executives derail: perspectives across time and cultures*’. Ellen van Velsor & Jean Brittain Leslie, Academy of Management Executive, 1995, Vol 9 No4.

included for completeness. None are particularly difficult in themselves – the challenge is to use judgement in identifying when each is required and discipline in undertaking them – especially at moments of corporate or personal stress when the temptations to revert to detail and control are often strongest.

Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it. Dwight D. Eisenhower

If delegation is so obviously beneficial for managers and their colleagues, why is it so often a problem in organisations of all sorts and sizes? It is because doing it effectively can be more difficult than it sounds. Many people find it tempting to stay too involved in detail – exercising control over activities that produce immediate and demonstrable results can feel comforting, and can certainly seem more appealing than grappling with the more complex issues of strategy, stakeholder management and talent development. But the avoidance of these critical tasks that inevitable comes with poor delegation is likely, at best, to limit progression, and at worst, to undermine success.

Both the most able and the least able managers sometimes find delegating uncomfortable, but for different reasons. The most able are driven, results orientated and ambitious and have often gained managerial status because of their track record as practitioners in their industry or profession. Delegating to less experienced, less efficient and sometimes simply just less able colleagues can be frustrating, particularly as doing it can be very time consuming. They regularly cry: *I haven't got the time to delegate, it's easier to do the important things myself.*

Less able managers worry about their own positions and often cling to control of detail to make themselves appear indispensable. Why delegate when that would make it clear that other people can indeed do all or part of your job? These sorts of managers often moan: *It would be great if someone else could do this, but there is just no one here who can.*

The Ten Step process set out later – what we have termed the ‘science’ of delegation – should enable less experienced leaders to be clearer on the key aspects of delegation and provide more seasoned leaders with a reminder of the good practice that can sometimes get forgotten. But it may not be enough. The most common causes of disappointment about the results of delegation are poor communication and misunderstood expectations amongst those involved. You clearly have a major role to play in avoiding these pitfalls, so before you start the Ten Step process, consider your own performance in three of the key tenets of leadership that are integral to effective delegation – what we have called the ‘art’ of delegation.

The art – having a look in the mirror

First, give some thought to your need for control. Being driven to get things done and to achieve objectives – characteristics that often distinguish executives in the early stages of their careers – can come with the need to control processes and detail. Delegating will be difficult unless this is overcome. Many of the most effective leaders, particularly those in complex, matrixed and global organisations, as well as those in knowledge industries, lead by the mantra that they are *in charge, but not in control*. They see working through others as the most effective way to get things done.

Accepting the implications of *more responsibility, less control* can be difficult. It will probably involve accepting that getting a job done to 90% of what you might regard as perfect is better than the alternative – doing it yourself. It will almost inevitably involve taking responsibility occasionally for tasks that have not gone well when you have delegated them – which is not always easy. How do these ideas sit with your view of your role as a manager or leader? Could you be more effective by exercising less, rather than more, control? Are you ready to accept the pitfalls of failed delegation as well as the applause for success?

The art

How am I at listening?

In charge, but
not in control?

Where could the best
ideas come from?



Second, consider your listening skills, as listening is at least as important to communication as speaking. How often do you ask: *What do you think* before giving your own view or opinion? Neuroscience, as well as practical experience, suggests that our brains respond more creatively to questions than statements. Try asking questions that prompt new thinking about something you want to delegate rather than suggesting a particular approach or course of action. Ask your colleagues at all levels how they would rate your listening skills – and push them for honest answers.

Last, reflect on where you think the best ideas for your business are likely to come from. Traditionally, managers saw it as their role to generate ideas, strategies and business plans and staff were expected to execute them. Managers commanded and controlled, staff did the work. A combination of factors, including globalisation, the information technology revolution and the growth of ‘knowledge’ industries, has changed that. Many leaders now accept that they can no longer have all the answers and that good ideas can come from anywhere and from all levels of organisations.

How do these ideas resonate with you? Do you feel that your colleagues with less experience could come up with answers to business problems as well as you and your more senior colleagues? How good are you at encouraging colleagues to voice their opinions and at seeking out other people’s views and ideas?

Delegation will be more effective if you listen to the views and input of others, if you are naturally inquisitive and welcoming of others’ views and if you focus on the important aspects of *what* is to be achieved rather than *how* the task is to be tackled. Remain thoughtful of your own performance in these dimensions as you embark on the ‘science’ of delegation.

The science



The science - a Ten Step framework

Everyone in corporate life knows that there is nothing particularly difficult about any of the individual components of delegation. The challenge is in identifying when each is required, in undertaking them in a disciplined way and in remembering to apply them when stressed and under pressure. The Ten Step process outlined below should provide a useful framework. At first glance it may seem cumbersome, rigid and overly structured. Do not be put off – some of the steps may not always be necessary; others should only take a few minutes to complete; and even the key ones will become second nature as they become routine.

Step one - Check the basics: as a prelude to any specific delegation, it is sometimes useful to check that everyone in your team or sphere of managerial influence is clear about their roles. Review, discuss and confirm each individual's responsibilities, authority and resources (staff, access to external input, budget). Make sure that there is no gap between your and their expectations – and agree 'what success looks like' for everyone in their roles. Being clear about what is expected of people will make delegation easier, and sometimes unnecessary. This step may only be needed occasionally but should prove to be a valuable exercise in understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the people around you. That, in turn, will underpin trust – a key contributor to effective delegation.

Step two - Match make: before enlisting anyone for a particular task, think hard about matching what the task requires with the skills and abilities available. Stretching and testing projects can produce wonderful results and development opportunities; but overwhelming or crippling tasks will achieve nothing (or worse). But be prepared to take some risk at this stage of the process – there may be gaps between candidates' skills and what is required. That is what provides the 'stretch' and the

opportunities for development. If appropriate, communicate your thoughts on how the skills and abilities of those you have chosen match the task - it will be motivating for them and will help others understand what you are setting out to achieve.

Step three - Set the scene: your colleagues will be better placed to deliver good results if they understand how what you are seeking to delegate fits with your organisation's vision, strategy and specific business priorities. So start conversations about delegating tasks with clear and full explanations - resisting thoughts like 'they know all of that already' as a good proportion probably will not, or will have forgotten, and a reiteration will certainly do no harm to the rest.

These first three steps require you as the delegator to do all the work. Steps 4 to 8 will be more effective when delegator and delegate enter into a dialogue. 'Agree' should involve discussing, questioning, iterating and maintaining an open mind to the ideas and input of all involved.

Step four - Agree scope: one of the most common causes of failure of projects and delegated tasks is ambiguity surrounding what exactly is required. So setting out as precisely as possible 'what success looks like' is a key aspect of successful delegation. This should include the specific results, outcomes and deliverables. It may also include a list of the people who need to be involved or consulted. This process should focus on *what* is required, not *how* the task might be undertaken.

Step five - Agree authority: another key component of delegation is agreeing the level of authority that you want to entrust to those you are delegating to - and getting confirmation that they are happy to accept it. The spectrum of authority will vary according to organisations, teams, individuals and projects. At extremes, it will range from 'look into the issue and report back for me to take a decision' to 'look into the issue

and do whatever you think is required - I don't need to hear back'. Positions in between will include presenting alternative solutions, proposing a single course of action and letting you know what has been decided and enacted.

Confusion about the degree of authority being delegated can cause you embarrassment at many levels and can be demotivating for others. So spend considerable time thinking about what is appropriate - and exploring the issues to ensure that everyone is clear and comfortable with the agreed outcome. In some instances it may be useful to get buy in from other key executives in your organisation about how you are delegating specific tasks - and to make their approval and support known to those taking on the tasks and others affected.

Step six - Agree resources: it is important that those you have delegated tasks to understand what resources they have available to them. In some cases this maybe unnecessary, perhaps when a task is being delegated to a specific team or division. But when resources from outside an individual's team or division should or could be involved, it is helpful to be specific. This is also true when external resources - advisers, consultants, contractors - could be used, as a budget may need to be agreed too.

Step seven - Agree the delivery framework: even when the scope of a task is clear, it is essential that timetables, deadlines and reporting structures are discussed and agreed. This should include not just the date of the final delivery, but the number, frequency and agendas for update sessions. In larger projects it may include the committee structure; in smaller tasks it may still stipulate who and when regular reports need to go to. These should be discussed and agreed, not dictated - the person or persons accepting the task will often be just as well placed as you to recommend appropriate approaches - so

listen hard. But be clear on the conclusions and get explicit acceptance of the framework from whoever is to undertake the tasks.

Step eight – Agree your role: although you are delegating responsibility to others, make it clear that you remain accountable to the organisation and to your senior colleagues for both the task and the outcome. Ensure that those accepting the task understand this, that they in turn are accountable to you, and that they have your full support. Reiterate that your primary interest is in the *'what'* and ask them what support they would like from you. This might include making yourself available (possibly within agreed boundaries) to coach them on the *'how'* if they request it. Offer to communicate your support and interest in the task to others and to make whichever internal or external introductions and referrals they may need.

Step nine – Keep your nose out: you may find it difficult to let go of delegated tasks and may be tempted to check in or ask for frequent updates on detail. Email, especially being cc'd on everything, can be a particular temptation in this regard. Similarly, those you have delegated tasks to may be reluctant to take full responsibility and may try to keep you involved as an *'insurance policy'*. You must resist getting involved and show your confidence in your people by leaving them to it. Also remember that you are delegating for good reasons, including that it will allow you to focus on other issues where you can add more value. Remind yourself that every moment spent on detail is a moment lost for what else you could be doing.

Step ten – Give and seek feedback: many organisations are poor at de-briefing after tasks or projects have been completed. Those that do, often focus primarily on the negative aspects and on the performance of less experienced staff. Learning from experience can be very powerful, so encourage those you have asked to take on tasks to have regular de-briefs and to

celebrate successes as well as to note aspects for improvement. Also put your own role and performance on the agenda. Be thoughtful about who you include in this feedback process – cast a wide net and aim to get a well balanced view. By making feedback routine in this way you will encourage a performance and learning culture and create prompts that will underpin your efforts to delegate more effectively in the future.

Like many aspects of leadership, delegation involves nothing that is particularly difficult in itself but requires judgement and discipline to be effective. This is particularly true at moments of high pressure and / or stress. Practising the art of self-reflection and the science of the Ten Step process outlined here should enable less experienced leaders to be more accomplished and help more seasoned executives resist the temptations to revert to detail when under pressure. This will be motivating for others and give you greater scope to undertake the tasks that will add the most value to you and your organisation.

Notes

Acknowledgements

Delegation – the art and the science was compiled by Robin Hindle Fisher with help and input from clients and colleagues. In addition to being a partner at Hay Hill Partners, Robin is a non executive director of Ruffer LLP and a Sloan Fellow at London Business School.

Thanks go to the many people who contributed to this pamphlet. In particular, to the small number of clients who kindly reviewed early drafts.

About Hay Hill Partners

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