



The Delegation Dilemma

How many times have you said to yourself, *“By the time I teach him/her how to do it, I could have just done it myself!”* Has your spouse told you in the heat of an argument about household chores, *“Well, you never ask for help anyway. You won’t let anyone help you!”* If these refrains sound familiar, you’re not alone. It seems like such a cruel reality that while we’re often frustrated and overwhelmed with an overload of work, we somewhat paradoxically resist what would seem to be an obvious solution – delegating more! The question is why do we resist delegating when we need so much help???

Although there are a few likely reasons for this, the overriding one is a simple fear that they won’t complete the task sufficiently and we’ll end up having to redo it later (an even scarier possibility for time sensitive tasks). I can certainly relate to it as I’ve felt that feeling many times myself – that nervous feeling in the pit of your stomach that keeps you up at night concerned with worry about whether the task is being done at all, how it’s being done, etc. In the midst of this it’s so easy to focus on the other person, but the real strides are gained by better understanding ourselves and recognizing that being able to delegate is a skill – indeed it’s like a muscle that must be exercised to become strong. Indeed to improve our delegations skills, we must truly understand the root causes and underlying/long term impact of our inability to delegate effectively.

I began to discover this for myself during a recent incident at home. Seasons were changing and I was feeling a bit overwhelmed by the need to buy a new wardrobe for both of my preschoolers, pack up all the old clothes and restock their closets for the new fall/winter season. Of course this was happening at the same time that work was exploding and needed extra ordinary time and attention. During one particularly frenzied morning, I lashed out at my husband insisting that he didn’t help out enough (particularly with the kids’ clothes responsibilities). He immediately responded *“I don’t mind buying all the kid’s clothes. I’ll just get them from now on.”* Instead of feeling a sense of relief, I felt an overwhelming sense of fear and responded with brutal honesty that surprised even me – *“I don’t trust you to get them!”* My brutal honesty in that moment jolted me and those words told me a lot about myself. Indeed, with visions of clearance priced, mismatched, irregular clothes, I didn’t trust that he would buy the right sizes, styles, etc. and I was fearful at the thought of losing control over this area of my kids’ lives. Most jolting for me was the fact that I’d told him that I didn’t trust him. Although this was a seemingly trivial personal example, it highlighted several key issues that translate to the workplace as well:

Why Most Leaders Don’t Delegate

Leader’s emotional barrier to delegating: Fear

Source of fear: Fear of losing control

Impact on others: Communicates lack of trust



Many leaders can relate to this fear of losing control which may quite possibly be even more prevalent among high achievers. High achievers have extremely high standards and are used to being able to control their environment. In order to control their environment there's a subtle internal pull/inertia that constantly encourages them to minimize risk and delegation introduces risk in many cases so there's a pull against that. What we must ask ourselves is this...what is this inability to relinquish control costing us?

I think the costs are quite high indeed:

1. Losing the ability to share the workload. Although we often don't want to task others because we're concerned about reducing "quality" in many ways quality suffers more when we take on too much. What is masked as a fear that they won't perform the task well is really a fear that they won't perform it as we would. Certainly they probably won't do it exactly as we would and we have to embrace that. Getting a fresh perspective on the task can be quite beneficial so we need to view that as a positive.
2. Robbing them of the ability to enhance their skills in that area. How can others learn if they don't have an opportunity to build their skills. Delegation can also double as a coaching opportunity if there are check ins throughout the process and a debriefing at the end to explore what worked well and what could be done differently next time.
3. Communicating lack of trust to others. Trust quite simply is the DNA of a strong relationship. When you diminish trust, you simply erode the relationship. Moreover, in an organizational situation others tend to rise to the level of what's expected of them. If they sense that you feel they're inept in a particular area, they're more likely to lack confidence and not perform well.
4. Foster the perfection disease. When we maintain such tight control of our environment that failure isn't allowed, innovation and creativity are all but snuffed out.

The most effective leaders have developed the ability to fight this natural inertia to control their environment. I can't stress enough that "letting go" is uncomfortable and will only become more comfortable with intentional effort. Here are a few tips on how to develop your delegation muscles:

1. Start small. Don't delegate something that is mission critical. Delegate something small (initially) and work your way up to delegating larger, more important tasks.
2. Seek the right fit. Everything shouldn't be on the table for delegation not just because of the importance of the task but also because some tasks are a better fit for the particular person you're delegating to than others. This doesn't mean that they shouldn't stretch to develop new skills, but look for areas where they have unique ability, interest, or insight if possible. Maybe they're a skilled web developer but never presented a new website to a client. This task while new for them pulls on their natural strengths as well and provides them a "confidence cushion" so to speak.
3. Don't have unrealistic expectations – encourage them to put their unique footprint on the task. Remember that there is a difference between someone doing something "wrong" and them not doing it the way we would have done it. Style differences are just that. If they prefer circle bullets, and you prefer squares, keep it to yourself!
4. Ask the recipient what level of support/communication they want. Everyone hates the micromanager who "half delegates". Avoid this by asking them how often they want to check in with you, etc. If they propose a timetable that doesn't provide enough feedback in your mind, ask if you can check in more frequently initially and then reduce the frequency as the task progresses.



5. Reward effort AND results. In order for others to truly learn, they need to feel that it's ok to make mistakes. Indeed in a learning environment, effort is as important as results. If they're stretching their abilities and trying new things, that in itself is an achievement and should be acknowledged. With increased confidence comes better results so don't focus on results exclusively. If you've now conquered your fears of losing control, you must begin to help them conquer their fears as well.

As for me and my delegation dilemma with my husband, I decided that a compromise was in order. I proposed that he buy the kids' pajamas and I would buy their school clothes. I decided to exercise Tip #1 (Start Small). Ironically, I spoke with a client recently who had a similar argument with her spouse and they came to a compromise agreement that he would buy the boys' clothes and she would buy the girls' clothes – exercising Tip #2 (Seek the Right Fit).

Delegation isn't easy. Neither is good leadership. Just remember that the best leaders aren't the ones who excel as an individual but the ones who make those around them better.

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