

Delegation for Employee Development

Sometimes thought of as a dirty word in the past, delegation can be just the key managers need to make their employees happy, productive, and loyal.

By DONNA VINTON

Delegation is generally thought of as a time management tool for managers. But when it is properly applied, delegation can be a tool in developing employees' skills, knowledge, and self-confidence and in increasing their job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

Delegation levels

A common theme in writings on the topic of delegation is the idea that delegation is not abdication. The manager does not give up entirely the control of either process or results, if delegation is properly done. However, there are various levels of managerial involvement possible in the implementation of the task. Ross Webber lists the following eight levels:¹

- Look into this problem. Give me all the facts. I will decide what to do.
- Let me know the alternatives available with the pros and cons of each. I will decide which to select.
- Recommend a course of action for my approval.
- Let me know what you intend to do. Delay action until I approve.
- Let me know what you intend to do. Do it unless I say not to.
- Take action. Let me know what you did. Let me know how it turns out.
- Take action. Communicate with me only if your action is unsuccessful.
- Take action. No further communication with me is necessary.

Whatever the level of delegation, several steps will be included in the process. First,

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delegation requires selection of employees to do the job. Second, the task must be clearly defined to employees, including a description of the activities which might be undertaken, the results that are to be achieved, and the context of which the activity is a part. Third, the people receiving assignments need to know how much authority they will have and what resources will be available for the completion of the tasks. Fourth, managers must com-

Communication in effective delegation is a two-way process, encouraging exchange of ideas and a problem-solving attitude

municate relevant organizational policy that may affect the carrying out of the task and the factors upon which performance will be evaluated. Finally, managers need to be clear about the type and frequency of reporting and communication they expect.

At its best, the delegation process is one of mutual consultation and agreement. Employees' reactions and ideas can be solicited at any point in the process, and by doing so managers establish the atmosphere of trust, support, and open communication that will be necessary for optimum results to be achieved, both for completion of the tasks and for development of the employees.

Adding to skills

Managers sometimes tend to overuse very competent employees, resulting in overloading these individuals' time. At the very least, by not adding to the skills of those less obviously competent, managers deprive themselves of additional resources

that could be drawn upon when needed. Delegation to develop employees, then, requires that managers

- be able to determine when subordinates are ready to move ahead and take on more responsibility;
- be willing to let others approach problems in their own way and even to let them make mistakes.

In his article "Delegation—The Essence of Management," in the October 1978 issue of *Personnel Journal*, Francis Tritt makes this observation:

"Every professional can quote in his sleep the results of the famous General Electric study that came out of the 1950s which showed that 90 percent of a person's development is the result of his experiences on the job, *not* the result of formal classroom learning experiences. . . . Knowing, then, that development and learning is the result of *doing*, it becomes obvious that what one does on the job is a direct result of what one is *allowed* to do on the job. Hence, the connection between delegation and development is abundantly clear."

A key to using delegation to develop skills lies in identifying employees' task-relevant maturity (TRM). Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard in their book *Management of Organizational Behavior; Utilizing Human*

Resources define maturity in this sense as the "ability and willingness of people to take responsibility for directing their own behavior. . . in relation to a specific task to be performed." Thus, individuals' TRMs will vary from task to task, and managers must be familiar enough with the employees' current strengths, weaknesses, interests, and needs to identify the task that will stretch those individuals' capabilities without setting them up for failure.

Achievement and job satisfaction

Chris Argyris has pointed out what he calls a "basic, continuing problem" in the dilemma of the conflict between the needs of individuals for self-actualization and the needs of organizations for such things as a clear chain of command and task specialization. The results of this conflict for the employee are feelings of frustration and failure and the experience of "competition,

rivalry, (and) intersubordinate hostility," along with a "focus toward the parts rather than the whole." The employee may adapt to this situation by such acts as leaving the organization; daydreaming; becoming aggressive, regressive, or ambivalent; and becoming disinterested in the organization. Some managers react to such behavior by establishing tighter management controls, a move which perpetuates the original situation. Argyris suggests that the way out of the dilemma is to reduce employees' dependency, subordination, and submissiveness to their work and gives job enlargement as one solution.

But Frederick Herzberg replaces the term *job enlargement* with the term *job enrichment* to distinguish between what he calls "horizontal job loading" and "vertical job loading." The former refers to such strategies as increasing production goals, increasing the number of tasks without increasing their meaningfulness, decreasing the difficulty of the assignment in order to increase productivity; strategies that add to the meaninglessness of the job. Vertical job loading, on the other hand, adds to meaning. The principles of vertical job loading and their relationship to the act of delegation are examined in Figure 1.

While job enrichment is not a universally accepted management concept, looking at delegation in this light allows managers to release themselves to do other tasks that need to be done while at the same time enriching employees' jobs without totally restructuring those positions or the department and increasing employee job satisfaction and motivation.

Developing organizational commitment

How commitment to the organization is developed and maintained is of central importance to organizations and has no easy solutions nor hard and fast answers. But in a 1975 study of 279 managers from eight large U.S. companies—three of which were *Fortune*-500 manufacturing concerns and five of which were federal government agencies—Bruce Buchanan attempted to identify the causes of commitment. The findings identified experiences that fostered commitment among all 279 managers; then multiple regression analysis was used to identify those experiences having the strongest association with the development of commitment.

The five classes of experience having a significant impact on commitment, in order of strength, were

- a feeling of personal importance from

being considered productive and valuable to the organization;

- experience in a cohesive group with positive feelings toward the organization
- realization of expectations (The question asked was "Has my organization fulfilled its promises to me and otherwise met my expectations in areas I care about?");
- organizational commitment norms (if employees who thought that their organizations expected them to be committed were more committed than those who didn't sense those expectations);
- first-year job challenge.

Buchanan notes that the impact of the last item was both predictable and surprising: predictable in that "a challenging, interesting, and self-confirming work assignment would strengthen commitment," and surprising in that "the job experience of the first year continued to shape the attitude of managers."

The recommendations for managerial motivation that Buchanan draws from his study can be directly related to the process of delegation. Buchanan identifies self-maintenance and self-confirmation as the

unifying theme of managerial motivation and makes four recommendations: avoid overstaffing as it dilutes challenge, design jobs with a certain degree of challenge, find ways of bringing to employees' attention to the link between their jobs and the whole, and monitor the growth of individuals in their jobs in order to periodically adjust responsibility upward.

Given the findings of Argyris, Herzberg, and Buchanan, several points may be made with respect to delegation as a tool for development of employees.

- Delegate duties that slightly challenge employees but will insure success.
- Relate the delegated task to the overall goals of the department or organization and show its importance in that context.
- Support the notion that employee development must be part of a larger plan, not just an occasional or isolated occurrence that takes place when it is convenient or expedient.
- Use delegation as a tool for development of both the new employee and the experienced one.

Figure 1—Delegation as a form of vertical job loading

Job Loading Principle	Guide for Effective Delegation
1. Remove some controls while retaining accountability.	1. Give employees freedom to pursue tasks in their own way, while establishing agreed-upon results and standards of performance.
2. Increase the accountability of individuals for their own work.	2. Encourage an active role on the part of employees in defining, implementing, and communicating progress on tasks.
3. Give people a complete natural unit of work.	3. Entrust employees with completion of whole projects or tasks whenever possible, or at least explain tasks' relevance to larger projects or to department or organization goals.
4. Grant additional authority to employees in their activities.	4. Give employees the necessary authority to accomplish tasks and allow them to do jobs in their own ways.
5. Make periodic reports directly available to workers themselves rather than to their supervisors.	5. Allow employees access to the information, people, and departments which may not ordinarily be directly available to them to accomplish their tasks.
6. Introduce new and more difficult tasks not previously handled.	6. Assign tasks that move employees beyond their current TRMs; provide training, instruction, and guidance as necessary to complete tasks.
7. Assign individuals specific or specialized tasks, enabling them to become experts.	7. Assign tasks based on employees' needs and interests.

Make feedback ongoing

Feedback allows employees to assess their performance accurately, learn from errors, see how they are perceived by others, replace unproductive work habits, examine alternative modes of behavior, and increase self-awareness. But failure to provide appropriate or sufficiently frequent feedback is a common problem.

Many managers are not trained in coaching or feedback techniques and may rely on the annual performance appraisal to create the vehicle for providing feedback. Yet while performance appraisals are necessary, they have shortcomings if they are the sole form of feedback. They come only once or, perhaps, twice a year; they may be related to salary or other tangible reward systems and thus may create defensiveness on the part of the employee; and they may not be tied to a plan for growth. Managers should have a continuous method of sharing feedback with their subordinates.

Delegation is a way to communicate feedback. The very act of delegating tasks to employees shows that managers trust their subordinates, respect their skills, and have confidence in their abilities and potential for contributing to the organization. Effective delegation processes build-in feedback points as progress on the project is communicated to managers. The feedback is not artificial, as the yearly performance appraisal may seem to be, but is a natural outgrowth of the task. Feedback stemming from this communication process is ongoing, expected, and may even be negotiated as employees' ideas concerning implementation of tasks and reporting possibilities are solicited. Communication in effective delegation is a two-way process, encouraging exchange of ideas and a problem-solving attitude.

Underuse of delegation

There are a number of reasons why delegation is often underused in general and, specifically, as a tool for developing employees. One reason may be that delegation is often seen as a "dumping process" by which managers give to employees those tasks that managers find undesirable and keep for themselves only tasks that afford the most personal enjoyment. When employees see delegation in this light, they view it as merely a transfer of tasks rather than as a tool for development of the individual, department, or organization; will lose respect for their manager because they believe the manager is misusing their time and skills; and will resent what they

see as the manager's failure to recognize their potential.

Some researchers take another approach and examine the potential for delegation to trigger feelings of loss in the manager: loss of power, loss of authority, loss of meaning, loss of personal expression, and loss of achievement.² The delegation process is seen as subtractive; that is, what is delegated is seen as taken away from the manager rather than as a process that is additive and brings managers and employees consulting together to define tasks, increase productivity, and meet organizational goals. Such a view also ignores the centrality of managers as coaches in effective delegation by providing training, support, and guidance as necessary to see the task through to completion.

Even if managers accept the necessity of developing employees and understand the role that delegation can play in the process, development of employees may not be a recognized or rewarded management behavior in some organizations. Given a low organizational priority, whether or not there is written policy promoting it, employee development may well have to wait for attention until the myriad of daily tasks have been attended to and bottom-line productivity adequately attained.

Effective delegation, whether for the purpose of developing employees or for other reasons, is not easy. It requires the ability to plan, organize, and control many activities with both short- and long-term goals and the ability to manage employees with diverse needs and skills. As such, delegation cannot be expected to come easily or naturally, and unless managers understand the delegation process and work under an organizational policy that both expects and rewards delegation, it is likely that delegation will continue to be underutilized.

References

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