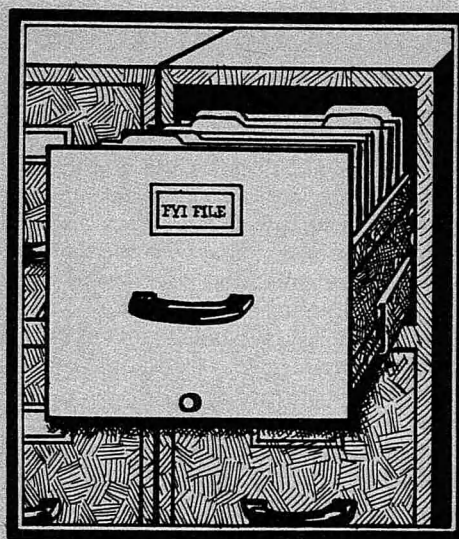


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Giving an Assignment In a Meaningful Manner

When you give an assignment to someone who works for you, does he or she have a clear understanding of what is to be done? A "no" answer can be dismissed for obvious reasons. If your answer is yes, can you conclude that you are supervising capably, at least insofar as assigning work is concerned? Surprisingly enough, the answer is probably no.

You may well find this irritating. After all, if the people who work for you know what they are supposed to do, what more could be expected of you as a supervisor? The truth is that if you have been stressing what is to be *done*, rather than what is to be *accomplished*, then it is unlikely that you have been giving assignments in a meaningful way.

It is true that when you are dealing with a new employee, he/she will likely need to be told how to handle an assignment. This is a special case, however. Those who have experience and technical know-how, and who are competent, should be able to work out the best way to get the job done on their own. The emphasis, then, should be on the *results* required, not on courses of action.

If you can accept the validity of this point of view, then what ought to be done to make an assignment meaningful follows logically. First, what are the general objectives of your group? Do you and your people have a clear understanding of what they are?

Second, what are the objectives of the assignment? Specifically:

- What is to be accomplished?
- What resources do you have to work with? (Time, money, people, technology, plant or equipment, raw

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materials and energy, the market, etc.)

- What things do you want to remain unchanged? (You don't want to make progress in one area, at the expense of regression in another.)
- What constraints are you up against? (Legal, company policy, management edicts and so on.)

Third, how do the specific objectives of the assignment fit in with the general objectives of your group?

Fourth, how do the objectives of the assignment stack up against the objectives of other assignments? In other words, what priority does this assignment have? What are the seriousness, urgency, and growth of this assignment relative to the S-U-G of his/her other jobs?

Fifth, you should take into account that completion of this assignment may be a critical area in your plan for meeting your group's general objectives. How critical is it? What will be the effect on your plan if the assignment is not completed in the right way, or in the allotted time?

If your judgment is that this assignment is indeed a critical area, you should take some time with your subordinate to evaluate the potential problems he/she might encounter, and how you might reduce their threat to your plan. This would involve:

- Smoking out the potential problems. (What can go wrong?)
- Evaluating the threat of each one. (Probability and Seriousness.)
- For potential problems which carry significant threat, setting up preventive action to reduce the probability, or, if this is not practical,
- Setting up contingent action to reduce the seriousness.

Your subordinate will eventually be appraised on the proficiency with which he or she handles assignments. Consequently, you owe it to him/her to make it plain just what is expected. The steps in handing down a meaningful assignment are:

1. Be sure that you, and your people, have a clear understanding of the overall objectives of your group.
2. Lay out the specific objectives for the assignment.
3. Clarify, if necessary, how the objectives of the assignment fit together with your general objectives.
4. Establish the priority of the assignment.
5. Evaluate the need for a potential problem analysis, and, if necessary, do it. — Reprinted from *KT Journal*, Second Quarter, 1979.