



divisive delegation

When “Just Do It” just won’t do it, leaders must use efficient delegation skills.

by Francie Dalton

did you ever wonder why it’s so tough to get desired outcomes from those highly paid, well-educated senior executives of yours? Whatever the dimensions of suboptimal performance in your organization, chances are that at least one of the causal factors is the way you (and they) delegate. Poor delegation can easily be categorized as either inadequate or disabling. Within these two categories are no less than 12 classic errors in delegation. Following is a description of each and easy-to-implement tips for how to avoid or correct them.

Inadequate delegation lacks a qualitative and/or a quantitative dimension. Usually unintentional, it is characterized by sloppy processes, visible in hindsight, that result in rework after rework. To

avoid these problems, leaders can pursue a number of actions.

Failure to Identify a Higher Purpose

In the rush of doing business, it’s easy to delegate without articulating how the assignment enables the organization to achieve its strategic initiatives.

There are three important benefits to articulating the linkage between assignments and their higher purpose. 1) It increases the perceived importance of the assignment, thereby, 2) increasing emotional commitment to stellar execution. 3) It also equips the recipient of the delegated task with tools to motivate the performance and increase the morale of his or her staff. Identify the higher purpose of an assignment by asking yourself why the assignment is

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needed. Include this information when making the assignment.

Take the budgeting process, for example. Lisa Murphy, who is the Vice President of Finance, Administrator and CFO at BIO, says, “Staff are less resentful of the tedium involved in budgeting, and are more likely to participate in the process when they understand how their submission fits into the organization as a whole. They are more willing to honor timelines and accept reductions in their budgets when they are aware of the organization’s overall goals.”

Lack of Clarity

The key to ensuring clear expectations is establishing evidence-based performance measures. Start with an outcome you plan to assign. For example, if the assignment you’re making is to “Improve attendance at this year’s annual convention,” use the fill-in-the-blank (FIB) question. Rephrase the assignment goal as follows: “Attendance at this year’s annual convention will be adequately improved when _____.” Using this technique forces you to specify the expectations embedded in the assignment.

We are often told by senior executives that whenever they turn in work, they can predict that the boss will say something like, “This is fine, but why didn’t you also do X? The “FIB Statement” generates a level of clarity that helps align subordinate performance with your expectations, avoiding frustration for both parties.

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Failure to Delegate Developmentally

Aside from your responsibility to develop staff, you have the additional responsibility of retaining “the best.” Doing so in a competitive marketplace requires that you continually challenge the intellect of your executives.

For instance, the CEO of one company was interviewing candidates for an open vice presidential slot. Among the highly qualified applicants was one with less experience, but whose grit and determination the CEO believed would be adequately compensatory. The CEO warned his new hire that she should expect derisive comments and second-guessing from

other employees, but he was convinced she had the mettle to tough it out. In subsequent conversations, she confirmed the difficulties of the first eight months on the

job and stated that her emotional resilience was a direct result of the CEO’s belief in her.

Therefore, determine what new or expanded responsibilities will stimulate the growth of your direct reports, making reasonable stretch assignments accordingly. What are you not ready to give them? Why not? What would have to happen to change your mind? What’s the next logical step in their career? Are they ready? If not, what assignments can you make that will accelerate their readiness? If they express doubts about their ability, respond by expressing confidence in them, but don’t withdraw the

Impact Grid			
A	B	C	D
Decision Made/ Action Taken by You	Impact on D1 w/Actions Needed	Impact on D2 w/Actions Needed	Impact on D3 w/Actions Needed
• _____ • _____ • _____ • _____ • _____	• _____ • _____ • _____ • _____ • _____	• _____ • _____ • _____ • _____ • _____	• _____ • _____ • _____ • _____ • _____

assignment. You should work at creating the opportunity for subordinates to surprise and delight themselves by surpassing your expectations!

Failure to Anticipate Radial Impacts

Is it hard to discern what assignments will bleed into the assignments of others? Are the involved parties coming to you angry and confused about not having had input into or notification about an action or a decision that has affected their operation?

Senior executives make scores of broad-reaching decisions every day, and it’s not uncommon for them to lose sight of, and become insensitive to, the impacts of their decisions on other departments or individuals.

For example, one very busy vice president used to defend his propensity to make decisions unilaterally by claiming that the business was just “growing too fast to worry about wiping noses. They should know that I make decisions in the best interests of the firm, and without favoritism. And, they always find out eventually—even if it isn’t as soon as they’d like.” This attitude can have disas-

trous consequences. In this particular case, complaints ultimately rose to the level of histrionics, and the COO got his wings clipped.

One easy-to-use tool can help you avoid unnecessary run-ins with your colleagues. The “Impact Grid” above will help you identify in advance what implication delegating a project to one department is likely to have for other departments. This same grid can be used to anticipate the radial impact of decisions before they are announced.

Assigning Unreasonable Responsibility

Assigning responsibility in excess of authority is an error in delegation that is so pervasive—with an impact on morale so negative—that we’ll look at three examples. First, let’s say you’ve delegated responsibility to one of your executives for a specific legislative outcome. Unless the executive owns Congress, it’s inappropriate to hold him accountable for what becomes law. What *is* appropriate is to expect flawless execution of what both of you agree is a comprehensive strategy that maximizes the likelihood of the desired legislative outcome. So, rephrase the

Delegation Grid	
<p>Functions I Perform Well and Should Continue to Perform</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • _____ • _____ • _____ 	<p>Functions I Perform Well but Should Not Be Doing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • _____ • _____ • _____
<p>Functions I Perform Poorly but Should Learn to Perform Well</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • _____ • _____ • _____ 	<p>Functions I Perform Poorly and Should Not Be Doing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • _____ • _____ • _____

assignment as follows: “Work toward ensuring legislative outcome X is achieved.”

Second, let’s assume you’ve delegated responsibility to one of your executives for ensuring zero erosion of existing members. However, members can be lost through no fault of the executive. Mergers, acquisitions and bankruptcy are perfect examples. Avoid this misstatement of expectations by rephrasing the goal as follows: “Ensure zero erosion of current customer base for reasons other than mergers, acquisitions or bankruptcy.”

Third, what if you’re determined to get board approval for an increase in dues? Several vice presidents will likely share the responsibility, and a mistake by just one could derail the entire initiative. Avoid demoralizing the group by phrasing the goal as follows: “In collaboration with the vice presidents of membership marketing and public relations, work toward ensuring that the board agrees to a dues increase of at least __ percent by (speci-

fied date).” Then, follow up to ensure that each vice president is executing his or her specific responsibilities.

Now, consider the alternative to taking this advice. Your staff may exert the most determined effort and execute flawlessly, but if they do not achieve the desired outcome, they’ve failed. If your staff had control over the deciding factors, they should feel a sense of failure. But, if they did *not* have that kind of control, is that sense of failure really deserved? Is it really the message you want to send?

The Overachiever’s Complex

If you’ve secured the loftiest office in your business, you’re likely a classic overachiever. By definition, overachievers are especially prone to want to do everything, convinced that they can do it better and faster than anyone else. Therefore, they don’t delegate substantive work, with the result that they consistently have an overwhelming, albeit self-imposed, workload.

The Delegation Grid above will help reduce these risks while simultaneously making your star shine even more brightly. The grid invites you to scrutinize all your activities, listing them in one of four quadrants. If you complete this grid with brutal honesty (which may require input from others), the two right quadrants will contain fairly long lists. Your challenge is to shed everything on the right side of the grid.

Work on getting better at what you’ve listed in the lower left quadrant, but focus on finding broader applications for and better ways to feature the work listed in the top left quadrant. Instead of continuing with activities listed on the right half of the grid, seek additional work that requires the same strengths and competencies that

underlie the work you’ve listed in the upper left quadrant.

“Most CEOs,” says Marty Sagesse, CEO of the Society for Neuroscience, “are overachievers, and we have to have a valid rationale for letting go. The Delegation Grid provides that rationale. The grid not only helps identify what you should and shouldn’t be doing, it also helps with the really hard part, which is letting go of what you enjoy doing to the extent that it impedes optimal prioritizing and time management.”

Disabling delegation destroys an organization on the inside. It reveals a cultural pathology that is inaugurated by the leaders. Their actions poison relationships, undermine both morale and organizational pride and infect work outcomes. The

impact of these delegation errors is usually insurmountable unless there is a change in leadership. However, certain steps offer some degree of hope.

Emphasizing Outcomes over Methods

How accomplishments are achieved often matters as much as *what* is accomplished, yet the balance between outcome and method isn’t often reflected in assignments made to executives. Until CEOs impose equal scrutiny on both method and outcome when delegating, the impact of ineffective or abusive managerial behavior on corporate performance will stay under the radar, free to impede business results with impunity.

For example, some time ago we met a senior executive whose outcomes were superb, but who achieved results by intimidation and caustic belittling of others. The company CEO wanted desperately to retain the high quality product

the executive produced and tried to cajole others into tolerating the damaging behavior. As a result, other highly valued employees left, morale remained low, and the CEO lost the regard of employees who remained.

Augmenting the basic assignment with qualifying phrases such as the following can give you the tools needed to impose accountability for ineffective managerial behaviors:

- Consistent with our core values
- While protecting the confidentiality of _____

The CEO tried to cajole others into tolerating the damaging behavior.

- While continuing to adhere to _____
- With zero instances of lost temper.

Deliberate Redundancy

Assigning the same task to multiple vice presidents or other employees actually causes conflict and resentment rather than healthy competition. These reactions take the form of silo behavior, a lack of collaboration and information sharing, which generates redundancies and even sabotage. If your senior executives are like most, they're already desperate for crumbs of recognition and don't want to share what little they get. Avoid the problem by assigning a task to the appropriate person or department.

Abdication

When two or more vice presidents are feuding, you can't just step aside in disgust. Resolving disputes is part of your role as CEO. Sidestepping this responsibility makes you a culpable part of the problem, so let's look at your choices.

Your best option is to clarify the outcomes for which each party is responsible, define the lines of authority, and establish the ground rules for necessary collaboration. Consider using my five-step process.

- Get the parties together and let each describe "what's so" right now from their perspective.
- Facilitate a group discussion to answer the question "So what?" about each of the items elicited. If left unchecked, how will the organization, workflow and other facets of the business be

impacted by this feud?

- Define "desired state." That is, what does each party want? What does the organization need?
- Facilitate a group discussion that answers the question "Now what?" The purpose is to identify how the gaps between what's so and the desired state can be bridged, and secure agreements to implement them.
- Link compliance to performance reviews and bonuses, and enforce accountability!

If you know that you can't implement this process, you have three other choices. One option is to hire an inter-

ventionist to mediate the dispute and forge a resolution signed by all relevant parties. You can also retain a coach to meet separately with each individual, inspiring them

toward more emotionally mature behavior. Still another option is to implement a third-party-hosted, 360-degree feedback process. This allows the feuding parties to realize the impact their spat is having on the larger organization, a realization that usually produces a truce. Regardless of your choice, it's important to understand that as CEO, you must hold your executives accountable for adherence to a defined standard of collaboration.

Failure to Establish Accountability

An important part of effective delegation is defining the consequences of both success and failure. Awareness of conse-

quences motivates the quality and speed of execution. Failing to confront an executive's poor performance results in structural and procedural chaos, interpersonal hostilities, and retaliatory behaviors.

"Absent the imposition of specific accountabilities," says Lynn B. Nicholas, CEO of the American Diabetes Association, "your staff executives may perceive some of the assignments you give them to be busy work, particularly when they aren't committed to the assignment in the first place, because the idea was generated elsewhere, or because they don't believe the initiative will be successful. Failing to impose accountability is a big mistake. No one wins."

The best advice for correcting this delegation error is avoid it in the first place. Take formal action immediately

the first time an infraction is committed. A verbal reprimand is usually the first step, followed by a letter that becomes part of one's personnel file and imposition of some negative consequence. Continued infractions incur probation with further imposition of negative consequence, followed ultimately by termination.

Saving Their Bacon

Much like parents who do their child's homework, swooping in to rescue an executive from his or her own sloppy performance prevents growth, generates resentment from peers and erodes the respect of subordinates. Therefore, when

you delegate responsibility, also delegate the earned consequences.

Failure to Delegate to Strengths

Jayne Somes-Schloesser, Senior Vice President of Operations for the Mortgage Bankers Association, warns that "Delegating in a way that doesn't build on one's existing strengths not only creates disabling and unnecessary stress for all concerned, it also imperils the successful achievement of desired outcomes." A classic examples is putting the career CFO in charge of innovation, or asking the stereotypical expert engineer to present research

findings to an audience of laypersons, or moving your star outside sales professional into an inside management function.

Although there are most certainly exceptions to each of these examples, they are rare, and should be carefully vetted.

In conclusion, it's important to realize that these errors in delegation can indeed have crippling and long-lasting consequences for organizational accomplishment. Don't set yourself up for failure. Instead, work to ensure that you delegate in a clear, firm and compassionate manner so that your organization can experience continued success.

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