Delegation Pitfalls

Learn the 12 classic delegation errors, their impacts, and their remedies.

BY FRANCIE DALTON

EVER WONDER WHY IT'S SO TOUGH TO GET DESIRED OUTCOMES from those highly paid, well-educated, poised, and polished senior executives of yours? Is it that they keep turning in work products that aren't "ready for prime time"? Or is it that their stellar work outcomes are delivered at the cost of tremendous collegial discord? Are they truly understaffed and overwhelmed?

Whatever the dimensions of sub-optimal performance in your organization, chances are at least one of the causal factors is the way you (and they) delegate.

Poor delegation can be categorized as either *inadequate* or *disabling*. Within these two broad categories are no less that 12 classic and discrete errors in delegation. This article describes each error and provides recommendations on avoiding or correcting them.

Improving inadequate delegation

Delegation is inadequate when it lacks a qualitative or quantitative dimension. Usually unintentional, such insufficient delegation is characterized by sloppy processes and procedures that result in work having to be done over again—and frustrated staff charged with doing it. Watch for these delegation pitfalls and consider ways to sidestep them.

1. Failure to identify the higher purpose served. Caught up in the rush of doing business, it's easy to delegate on the run, without articulating how the assignment enables the organization to achieve its strategic initiatives. Three important benefits result from taking the extra minute or two required to articulate the linkage between the assignments and their higher purpose:

- It increases the perceived importance of the assignment.
- It increases emotional commitment to stellar execution.
- It equips the recipient of the delegated task with tools to motivate the performance of and increase the morale of his or her staff.

To identify the higher purpose of an assignment, ask yourself why the assignment is needed, what other outcome its accomplishment enables, and why that other outcome is needed.

Take the budget process, for example. Lisa Murphy, chief financial officer and vice president of finance and administration, Biotechnology Industry Organization, Washington, D.C., says, "Staff are less resentful of the tedium involved in budgeting—and are more likely to actively 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 made aware of the organization's overall goals."

2. Lack of clarity. Have you ever been surprised to discover at performance review time that one of your executives was oblivious to a requirement you thought was implicit? The key to ensuring clear expectations is the establishment of *evidence-based performance measures*. Here's how. Start with an outcome you plan to assign. Rephrase it using a fill-in-the-blank statement that quantifies success. For example, if your original goal statement is: "Improve attendance at this year's annual convention," rephrase the statement to say: "Attendance at this year's annual convention will be adequately improved when…." This technique forces you to clarify your expectations by specifying any or all of the following: a certain number of attendees, a certain type of attendee, a certain revenue number, and so forth.

We are often told by senior executives within our client organizations that when they turn in work the boss will predictably say something like: "This is fine, but why didn't you also do X? And how come you didn't think of Z?" Clarifying expectations at the time that the assignment is delegated goes a long way in aligning subordinates' performance with your expectations, avoiding disappointment and frustration for all parties.

3. Failure to delegate developmentally. Aside from your fiduciary responsibility to develop your staff in a way that is consistent with a sound succession plan, you have the additional responsibility of retaining the best employees. Doing so in a competitive marketplace requires that you continually challenge the intellect of your managers. This won't happen if you withhold delegation because you think that you can do the task faster, or because you want for yourself the visibility attendant to the task.

Instead, determine what new or expanded responsibilities will stimulate the growth of each of your direct reports, making reasonable *stretch* assignments accordingly. To do that, ask the following questions: What are you not ready to give them yet? Why not? What would have to happen to make you change your mind? What's the next logical step in each person's career? Are they ready? If not, what assignments can you make that will accelerate their readiness? If managers express doubts about their ability to accomplish the assignments that you've delegated, respond by expressing confidence in them, but don't withdraw the assignment.

By delegating developmentally, you'll create the opportunity for subordinates to surprise and delight themselves by surpassing your expectations. CEOs can almost immortalize

FIGURE 1: IMPACT GRID

A Decision made or action taken	B Impact on department one and actions needed	C Impact on department two and actions needed	D Impact on department three and actions needed

themselves when they urge people to reach beyond what they think they can achieve. In one of our client organizations, for example, a vice president made a recommendation that the CEO knew would not be well received by the board. The chief executive briefed the vice president as to the anticipated objections board members would make, assured him that his recommendation was nonetheless sound and appropriate—and then required him to deliver the presentation to the board himself, which he did.

The vice president later said that the experience was a real turning point in his career; he realized that he had the ability to deal with high-level conflict and fight for what he thought was right. Although his recommendation ultimately was defeated, he believes that the esteem that he earned from board members who applauded his effort prepared him for subsequent confrontations.

4. Inability to anticipate radial impacts. 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 operations?

Obviously, you make scores of broad-reaching decisions every day, and it's not uncommon to lose sight of, and become insensitive to, the impacts of those decisions on other departments or individuals.

We observed one busy chief operating officer who defended his propensity to make decisions unilaterally by claiming that the business "was just growing too fast to worry about wiping noses; managers should know that I make decisions in the best interests of the firm and without favoritism. They always find that out eventually, even if it isn't as soon as they'd like." This attitude can create disastrous consequences. In this particular case, complaints became so severe that the COO eventually had his wings clipped.

Here's an easy-to-use tool that will help you avoid unnecessary run-ins with your subordinates. Called the Impact Grid (See Figure 1), this tool helps you anticipate the possible impacts on key audiences of making assignments or decisions. Delegating a project to one department is likely to have implications for other departments; using this grid will identify those implications in advance. This same grid can be used to anticipate the radial impact of your decisions *before* you announce them.

5. Assigning responsibility in excess of authority. So pervasive is this error in delegation, and so negative is its impact on morale, that we'll look at three examples.

- Let's say you've delegated responsibility to one of your executives for a specific legislative outcome. Unless this individual *owns* Congress, it's inappropriate to impose accountability for what becomes law. What *is* appropriate is to hold the person accountable for the *flawless execution* of what you agree to be a comprehensive strategy that maximizes the likelihood of the desired legislative outcome. So rephrase the assignment to say: "Prepare a strategy that will be as effective as possible in ensuring that legislative outcome X is achieved."
- Now let's assume you've delegated responsibility to one of your managers for ensuring zero erosion of existing membership. Yet, members can indeed be lost through no fault of your executive. Mergers, acquisitions, and bankruptcy exemplify this point perfectly. 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."
- What if you're determined to get board approval for an increase in dues? This is likely a shared responsibility among several managers. A mistake by just one of them could derail the entire initiative. Protect yourself against demoralizing the entire 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 X percent by a specified date." Follow up to ensure that each vice president is executing his or her specific responsibilities toward this shared outcome.

6. Insistence on being an overachiever. If you've secured the corner office, it's not unlikely that you're a classic overachiever, prone to want to do everything yourself. Convinced that you can do it better and faster than anyone else, you may not delegate substantive work—with the result that you are likely to have an overwhelming, albeit self-imposed, workload. It all gets done (the overachiever won't settle for anything less), but in your zeal to succeed, you take on more and more, delegate less and less, and put various facets of your personal and professional life at risk.

The Delegation Grid (Figure 2) will help reduce these risks, while making your star shine even more brightly. The grid invites you to scrutinize all your activities, listing them in one of the 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 this grid. Work on getting better at what you've listed in the lower left quadrant, but focus on finding broader applications for and ways to better feature the work listed in the top left quadrant. Instead of continuing 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 already listed in the upper left quadrant.

"Most CEOs," says Marty Saggese, executive director, Society for Neuroscience, Washington, D.C., "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, but it also helps with the really hard part—which is letting go of what you enjoy doing to the extent that it impedes setting priorities and [effectively] managing your time."

Dealing with disabling delegation

This second category of delegation errors can do incredible damage to an organization. Disabling delegation sometimes reveals a cultural pathology inaugurated by the top leadership that poisons relationships, puts both morale and organizational pride on a downward spiral, and infects work outcomes. Don't find yourself—or anyone else on your team—guilty of these misdirected delegation methods. The impacts of these errors are often insurmountable and irreversible unless there's a change in leadership.

1. Emphasizing outcomes to the exclusion of method. How accomplishments are achieved often matters as much as what is accomplished; yet this balance between outcome and method isn't often reflected in assignments made by executives. Unless and until CEOs impose equal scrutiny on both method and outcome when delegating, the impact of ineffective or abusive managerial behavior on organizational performance will stay under the radar, free to impede business results with impunity.

Among our historical client experiences was a senior executive whose outcomes were absolutely superb, but whose methods of achievement included intimidation, hostility, and the caustic belittling of others. The CEO wanted desperately to retain the work product produced by this individual and tried to cajole others into tolerating the behavior. As a result, other highly valued employees left, morale remained low, and the CEO lost the regard of employees for not having dealt with the situation.

Augmenting the desired outcomes statement with qualifying phrases such as the following can give you the tools needed to impose accountability for ineffective or overly harsh managerial behaviors: *in ways consistent with our organizational core values; while protecting the confidentially of; while continuing to adhere to human resources policies, with zero instances of lost temper,* and so forth.

2. Facilitating deliberate redundancy. If you're thinking that assigning the same task to multiple managers inspires healthy competition, you're sadly mistaken. What this type of delegation actually inspires is conflict and resentment. It takes the form of silo behavior that leads to a lack of collaboration and information sharing, which generates additional redundancies, duplicate work, and even sabotage. If your senior executives are like most in my client organizations, they're already starving for crumbs of recognition from you and don't want to share what little they get. Exacerbate this feeling of impoverishment at your peril.

3. Abdicating responsibility. When two or more managers are feuding, you can't just step aside in disgust and tell the *children* to work it out themselves. Resolving disputes is part of your role as CEO, and your level of exasperation does not justify inaction. Sidestepping this responsibility makes you culpable as 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, crystallize the lines of authority, and establish the ground rules for necessary collaboration.

Consider a five-step process. Here's one way to handle it.

FIGURE 2: DELEGATION GRID

Things I do well that I should be doing	**Things I do well that I should not be doing**
Things I do poorly that I should be doing well	**Things I do poorly and should not be doing**

Contrary to what you may think, and regardless of your intent, you don't win esteem of others by not holding people accountable.

- Get the parties together and let each describe "what is so" from his or her perspective. List the grievances.
- Facilitate a group discussion that answers the question "So what?" with regard to each of the problems on the prepared list. If the complaints go unchecked, how will the organization, work flow, and other facets of the business suffer as a result of this feud?
- Define the *desired* state: what is it that each party wants? How does that mesh with what the *organization* needs?
- Facilitate a group discussion that answers the question: "Now what?" This conversation will help identify how the gaps between individual wants and organizational needs can be bridged. Once these are identified, secure commitments from all parties to implement the fixes.
- Link compliance to the commitments to the parties' performance reviews and bonuses, thus enforcing accountability.

If you know yourself well enough to realize that you may not be able to implement this rather confrontational process, you have a couple of other choices.

Hire an outside expert. Some clients that we work with have employed the services of an interventionist or mediator to work with all parties to come up with some resolutions agreeable to all. Effective interventionists use analytical tools that are specifically designed to subordinate emotion to process, enabling solutions to emerge more quickly and with less acrimony.

Other clients have retained coaches who meet separately with each individual, talking them through ways to achieve more emotionally mature behavior.

With either of these choices, you can find some advantage in not having to play the role of the heavy.

Use a 360-degree feedback process. Other clients have implemented a third-party-hosted 360-degree feedback process, which allows the feuding parties to receive input from others who interface with them in the organization, hence learning the impact of their behavior on the larger organization—a realization that is usually adequately convincing to produce a truce.

Regardless of the option you choose, it's important to understand that as CEO, you must still impose accountability for adherence to a defined standard of collaboration.

4. Failing to impose accountability. A related element of effective delegation is setting expectations regarding the consequences of both success and failure. Awareness of these consequences motivates the quality and speed of execution. If your staff member doesn't deliver to specifications or exhibits behaviors antithetical to organizational core values, it's your responsibility to confront those failures. Failing to do so results in structural and procedural chaos, interpersonal hostilities, and retaliatory behaviors.

"Absent the imposition of specific accountabilities," says Lynn B. Nicholas, CEO, American Diabetes Association, Alexandria, Virginia, "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 that the initiative will be successful."

A surprising number of my CEO clients are so uncomfortable confronting poor performance that they sidestep the imposition of negative consequences, feigning competing priorities to justify overlooking poor performance. Well, guess what? If you're the CEO, you don't get to use *comfort* as a determinant for action. Those who refuse to act have lost their right to complain. So if you're not going to hold your managers accountable for poor performance, then acknowledge your contribution to that poor performance and stop complaining about it. Understand, however, that by failing to impose accountability, your reputation as CEO can suffer, probably irreparably. Survey results from our client organizations where *soft leadership* is in residence suggests that you'll be viewed as a wimp, one who waffles, can be manipulated, and can't be relied upon to stand firm on anything—but who is a "really nice human being." Contrary to what you may think, and regardless of your intent, you don't win esteem of others by not holding people accountable. Indeed, as the survey data suggests, quite the reverse is so. Says Nicholas, "Failing to impose accountability is a big mistake. No one wins."

And remember, you are not without power. Look at what's in your arsenal of negative consequences: withholding or diminishing income, reducing title or status, barring the individual from participating in prestigious activities, imposing sabbaticals, requiring coaching or counseling sessions, reassigning subordinates, moving high-profile projects, and the like.

If it's getting the words out that seems most daunting to you, look for some help in *Effective Phrases for Conducting Performance Reviews*, by James Neal (1994, Neal Publications).

5. Saving their bacon. Much like parents who do their child's homework thinking that they're helping, swooping in to rescue managers from their sloppy performance generally stunts or prevents their growth, generates resentment from their peers, and erodes the respect of their subordinates. Worse, riding in on your white horse perpetuates the feeling of incompetence and insecurity among certain members of the staff and creates an atmosphere of self-doubt and lack of initiative. Get this:

Unless you want to continue managing adolescent behavior, when you delegate responsibility, delegate the earned consequences as well.

6. Delegating to weakness. Yes, I know that in the previous section I suggested delegating in a way that stretches and develops, but that's not the same as delegating tasks that are outside the scope of one's competence. Jayne Somes-Schloesser, senior vice president of operations, Mortgage Bankers Association, Washington, D.C., warns: "Delegating in a way that does not 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." Classic examples of this include putting the career chief financial officer in charge of innovation; putting the stereotypical expert engineer at the podium presenting research findings to an audience of laypeople; 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. One's enthusiasm or willingness to please should not be construed as competence.

While divisive delegation is often the culprit that lies behind poor organizational outcomes and seemingly incompetent staff, mustering the courage to take responsibility for improved delegation can result in your developing a bench of competent senior managers and a succession plan that will leave a legacy of leadership. Why not begin right now? AM

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