Coaching Your CEO Toward Improved Delegation

A step-by-step approach to bettering your business.

BY FRANCIE DALTON

Editor's Note: While this guest author piece was written for CEOs of large companies, the same principles can be applied to senior management in any size organization.

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The CFO is often the CEO's most trusted subordinate; the one to whom the CEO vents; the one with whom the CEO shares highly sensitive information; the one in whom the CEO honestly confides.

In such conversations with you, does your CEO ever complain about how tough it is to get desired outcomes from those highly paid, well educated, poised and polished peers of yours? Does your CEO complain that the VPs keep turning in work products that aren't "ready for prime time;" or that their stellar work outcomes are delivered at the cost of tremendous collegial discord? Do you understand that the reason these complaints are being shared with you is because your CEO wants your advice and counsel?

The purpose of this article is to equip you with an impressive inventory of solutions to the performance problems CEOs face every day.

More often than you'd think, the root cause of poor performance lies in errors of delegation. Poor delegation can easily be categorized as either Inadequate or Disabling. Within these two categories are no less that 12 classic and discrete errors in delegation.

This article describes each, and provides easy-to-implement tips you can share with your CEO for how to avoid or correct them.

Inadequate Delegation

1. Failing to Identify Higher Purpose Served: Caught up in the rush of doing business, it's easy for CEOs to delegate on the run, without articulating how the assignment enables the organization to achieve its strategic initiatives. Remind your CEO that there are three important benefits to taking the extra minute or two required to articulate the linkage between the assignments and their higher purpose: 1) It increases the perceived importance of the assignment, thereby 2) increasing emotional commitment to stellar execution; and, 3) it equips the VP with tools to motivate the performance of the staff and improve its morale. The technique to help your CEO quickly isolate and identify the higher purpose of an assignment is to ask why the assignment is needed, what other outcome its accomplishment enables, and why that other outcome is needed.

2. Lack of Clarity: Has your CEO ever expressed surprise at performance review time that one of your peers was oblivious to a requirement the CEO thought was implicit? The key to ensuring clear expectations is the establishment of evidence based performance measures. Ask your CEO to give you an example of an assigned outcome. Help rephrase it using a FIB (fill-in-the-blank) statement. For example, if the original goal statement is: "Improve attendance at this year's annual convention," using the FIB technique would rephrase the statement into this question: "Attendance at this year's annual convention will be adequately improved when ________." The FIB technique forces the clarification of expectations embedded in goal statement. In this example, it forces the specification of the following: a certain number of attendees, a certain type of attendee, a certain revenue number, etc.

3. 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 the goals and objectives assigned by the CEO. Unless and until CEOs impose equal scrutiny on both method and outcome when delegating, the impact of, for example, managerial behavior on corporate performance will stay under the radar, free to impede business results with impunity. Encourage your CEO to augment basic goal statements with qualifying phrases such as the following: "in collaboration with"; "per specifications provided by___"; "consistent with our core values"; "while protecting the confidentiality of"; "while continuing to adhere to ___"; etc.

4. Failing to Delegate Developmentally: Aside from the fiduciary responsibility to develop staff consistent with a sound succession plan, CEOs have the additional responsibility of retaining "the best." Doing so in a competitive marketplace requires that the intellect of the VPs be continually challenged. Help your CEO determine what new or expanded responsibilities will stimulate the growth of each direct report; encourage the assignment of reasonable stretch goals. Help your CEO realize that doing so creates the opportunity for the VPs to surprise and delight themselves by surpassing the CEO's expectations.

5. Failing to Anticipate Radial Impacts: Are your peers oblivious to the fact that their assignments can bleed into assignments of others? Are the involved parties too frequently running to the CEO angry and confused about whose sandbox ends where? If so, give your CEO this easy solution. Called the "Impact Grid" (See Figure One), this tool helps anticipate the possible impacts on key audiences of making assignments. Delegating a project to one department is likely to have implications for other departments; using this grid will identify those implications in advance. Additionally, this same grid can be used to anticipate the radial impact of your CEO's decisions before they are announced.

6. Abdication: When two or more VPs are feuding, the CEO can't just step aside in disgust and tell the children to work it out themselves. Remind your CEO that resolving serious disputes is part of the CEO's role. Suggest that the outcomes for which each party is responsible be clarified, with the lines of authority crystallized, and with ground rules established for necessary collaboration. Advise your CEO to link compliance with resolutions to performance reviews/bonuses.

Disabling Delegation

7. Deliberate Redundancy: Does your CEO seem to think that assigning the same task to multiple VPs inspires healthy competition? If so, tell your CEO that what this type of delegation actually inspires is severe conflict. It takes the form of silo behavior, a lack of collaboration and information sharing, which generates additional redundancies and rework. If your senior executives are like most in my client companies, they're already starving for crumbs of recognition from the CEO and don't want to share what little they get. Exacerbating this feeling of impoverishment causes the erosion of both morale and loyalty.

8. Failing to Impose Accountability: Part and parcel 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 CEO complains that your peers don't deliver to spec, point out that it's a CEO's responsibility to confront that failure. 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. Inspire your CEO to improve by pointing out that those who refuse to act have lost their right to complain!

CEOs don't get to use "comfort" as a prerequisite for action.

9. Saving Their Bacon: Much like parents who do their child's homework thinking they're helping, swooping in to rescue an exec from his/her own sloppy performance stunts or prevents their growth, generates resentment from their peers, and erodes the respect of their subordinates. Help your CEO understand that unless continuing to manage adolescent behavior is somehow appealing, earned consequences must be fully delegated commensurate with delegated responsibilities.

10. Delegating to Weakness: Delegating in a way that stretches and develops isn't the same as delegating outside the scope of one's competence. Particularly when there's a new high-profile project, CEOs often delegate to the "best available VP," rather than waiting to hire the "right VP." Help your CEO avoid this delegation error by referencing such classic examples as: putting the stereotypical engineer in charge of marketing; putting the stereotypical scientist at the podium presenting research findings to an audience of laypersons; moving the star sales professional into an inside management function; or staffing a highly regulated function with an entrepreneurial spirit. Caution your CEO that sustained success requires getting the right person for the job.

11. Assigning Responsibility in Excess of Authority: You're likely to go round and round with your CEOs about this one. So pervasive is this error in delegation, and so negative is its impact on morale, that I'm equipping you with three examples: 1) Let's say your CEO has delegated responsibility to a VP for a specific legislative outcome. Unless that VP owns Congress, it's inappropriate to impose accountability for what becomes law. What IS appropriate is to hold that VP accountable for the flawless execution of what is agreed to be a comprehensive strategy, which maximizes the likelihood of the desired legislative outcome. 2) Now let's assume the CEO delegates responsibility to a VP for ensuring zero erosion of existing customers. Customers can indeed be lost through no fault of that VP. Mergers, acquisitions and bankruptcy exemplify this point perfectly. Persuade your CEO to avoid this mistake by rephrasing the goal as follows: "Ensure zero erosion of current customer base for reasons other than M&A or bankruptcy." 3) What if your CEO is determined to get board approval for an increase in pricing? This becomes a shared responsibility among all VPs. A mistake by just one of the VPs could derail the entire initiative. Caution your CEO to protect against demoralizing the group by phrasing the goal as follows: In collaboration with VPs a, b & c, work toward ensuring the board agrees to a dues increase of at least "A" by (date). Then, each VP would have discrete responsibilities toward achieving the goal.

Figure One.

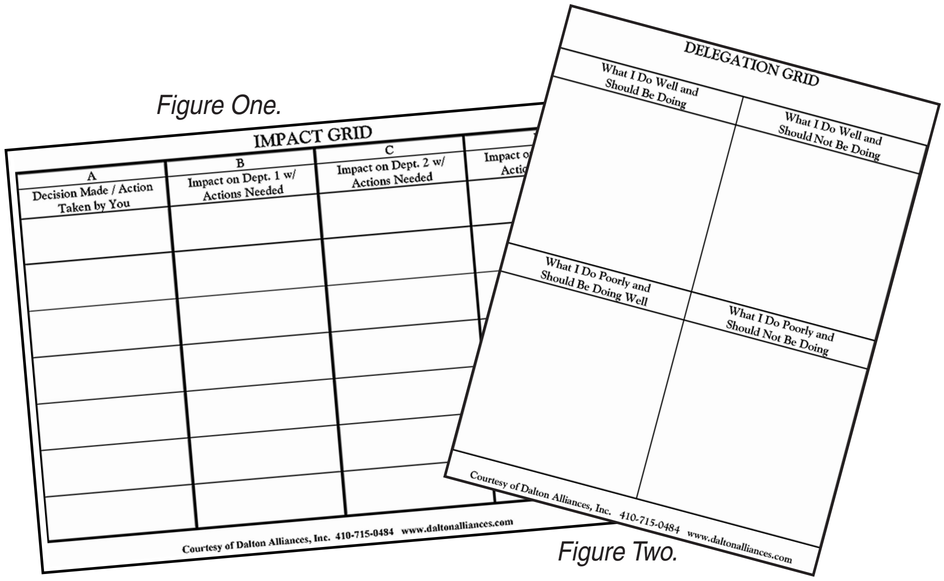

Figure Two.

12. The BIG ONE: Is your CEO constantly asking you and your peers to achieve more with less? Is s/he continually expanding an already overwhelming volume of work? If so, suggest that the VPs be equipped with the tools to better manage their workload. Introduce your CEO to The Delegation Grid shown in Figure Two, and then encourage that it be shared with your peers. The grid invites individuals to intensely scrutinize all their activities, listing them in one of the four quadrants. If this grid is completed with brutal honesty (which may require input from others), the two right quadrants will contain fairly long lists. The challenge is to shed everything on the right side, working instead to get better at what's listed in the lower left quadrant, while focusing on finding broader applications for and ways to better feature the work listed in the top left quadrant.

Whatever the dimensions of suboptimal performance in your organization, it's likely that the primary causal factor is the way your CEO delegates. I encourage you to take it upon yourself to develop such fluency with these 12 tips that you know instantly which one to recommend to help your CEO avoid the next performance problem. ❑

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