DELEGATION: THE ART OF LETTING GO (PROPERLY)

A rite of passage from being a manager to becoming a leader is the practice of delegation—a topic that has come up in most of my leadership workshops and coaching over the past 25 years. My good fortune is having worked with many savvy executives who have successfully made it through this emotionally challenging fire. Although it was never easy, they found a way to let go of the past to be able to ascend to a broader role in which they could further leverage their talents. Many learned the hard way, butting their heads against divorce, alienated children, burnout, and, for some, repeated failure. Yet they eventually mastered it and learned how to avoid many of its traps. Here are a few tips I've picked up over the years based on what I call “managing at the waterline.”

The Purpose of Delegation
The fundamental purpose of delegation is to give yourself a “time payment.” With this time payment you can attend to those non-technical or non-administrative issues that are related to your job. You can look ahead and address systems and process design, and policy deployment, as well issues and opportunities such as morale and the development of your people. This is all done to build a human infrastructure that can “handle the weight” of execution with a minimum of necessary attention from you.

Key Elements
The old saying “You can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear” is fitting, since the character of the person you are delegating to will be a limiting factor in your successfully getting a time payment. In reality, delegation has as much to do with the delegate as it does with you, the leader. If a follower doesn’t have the requisite drive, ambition, or ethic of personal accountability, you can do little to increase your scope in a sustainable way. These under-potentiated types will, at best, give you only partial support. Make your assessment early and determine if the real issue is one of character, confidence, or knowledge. The latter two can be developed, with time; if there is concern about character; however, back up the role and seek the help of your human resources. But whatever you do... punt as quickly as you can.

Letting Go...Properly
Some work activities for which you are responsible happen “below the waterline” and will “sink the ship” if not done right. These are the items either not meant to be delegated or to be delegated only to the most competent, caring, and trusted few. The vast majority of assignments and issues that arise, though, are “above the waterline.” Making the distinction between the two is the first step to successful delegation. Many technically, scientifically, or administratively trained people don’t do this; instead, all assignments are linked in their minds. This blind spot is often due to their egos’ being addicted to perfection or the “need to be needed”—yoking them to the behavior that made them successful in the past, but that will limit their potential for leadership going forward.
Above-the-waterline assignments, if not done with the expected level of quality or timeliness, are the savvy leader’s classroom. These leaders highlight errors and respectfully take their followers through a learning experience. However, many managers (for the rationalized reason of efficiency) fall into the trap of telling their followers what to do. This just reinforces the manager’s ego, bolstering his or her sense of relevance or intelligence, but reducing the follower’s confidence. Instead, a much better approach is to ask the follower to come up with the solutions. If there is a time constraint or a huge knowledge gap the delegate can always be told to talk with someone who has dealt with a similar situation in the past. This “kills three birds with one stone”: The manager does not have to take time to explain or teach, he or she demonstrates confidence in the employee being consulted, and people learn to reference each other instead of the manager, which adds to the latter’s time payment.

Sometimes you will have to step in, but this should be a last resort. Based upon the old Harvard B-School prescription that “managers should appropriately disallow employees from putting problems (monkeys) on the managers back”; Susie Greene, a colleague, often says, “Only monkeys with bananas.” That is, establish the expectation that if they feel they must bring a problem to you, they must also bring their best solution. Always let them know you appreciated their bringing up an issue (don’t ever show frustration when they come to you), but remind them of the longer-term goal of solving problems and assuming responsibility at the lowest possible level, and escalating appropriately. Most important, thank them for preventing you from being surprised by an issue after the fact.
**Reporting IS NOT Micro-Management**

To get a really great time payment, your goal should be to systematically and carefully move items from below the waterline to others to handle. This is a risky move in the short term, yet it’s often more risky for your career and for the company in the long-run if you don’t. There are some simple guidelines that must be followed with discipline to reduce below-the-waterline risk.

1. Pick a person who is ready or close to ready to take on the challenge. It stretches them (and you) out of your comfort zones, but isn’t in the “terror zone.”

2. Delegate in three stages. The first stage is “close reporting,” whereby you may ask them to report frequently, perhaps even daily. Let them know that micro-management is not your intention, but rather that frequent reports enable you to be kept aware of things in your area of responsibility. As they demonstrate competence with this newly-delegated task, gradually extend your expectation for reporting to increasingly longer intervals, such as weekly or bi-monthly. The goal is to fully delegate with an agreement that if it appears that something will go wrong, they will let you know early.

3. Always let them know you want “NO SURPRISES, GOOD OR BAD.” And that you expect them to report to you at a specific time and place. **Always ask them to come to you!** If they don’t come on time, don’t chase them down, but let them know that if they do not appear at the prescribed time and with the report you have asked for, it will be difficult, if not impossible, for you to delegate additional responsibility to them. DO NOT let even a small infraction go by without addressing it. Most of the time this will result in a shift in their behavior. If not, you have a bigger problem, as this demonstrates lack of drive, caring, and an ethic of personal accountability.

4. Always have what Tim Gelbar, the former President of AMEC Power and Process Americas, calls “touchpoints.” That is, think through a few key places in your unit or organization where you will notice when things are beginning not to go well. Most important is that you need to be disciplined about keeping track. At a high level, effective leaders know what is happening in their organizations.

**Comfort Means You Aren’t Delegating**

Last, if you aren’t uncomfortable delegating, you probably aren’t really doing it and are not going to get the future time payment you desire. When you follow the guidelines above you should still feel a bit anxious, if you are really making progress. If not, you are probably talking a good game and delivering little. A year later there will be no appreciable difference in your performance; you will still be doing what you are doing now, and both you and the organization are likely to suffer. However, if you practice the guidelines above, a year from now you will have freed up significant amounts of time to use as you choose, either personally or professionally.

“Courage is not the absence of fear; it is not letting our fear control us.”

*Rolling Thunder to Billy Jack (from the movie, “Billy Jack,” circa 1971)*