

Delegation - Fast tracking a system that works



Delegation of tasks or responsibilities is a fundamental feature of any workplace with more than a single proprietor. *It is the formal process that allows decision-making rights to be decentralized from a single organisational head down through the organisation to individual workers.* Assigning roles and setting goals is the way that many organisations break up the workload across the team of people, so that more can be achieved than with a single person (Kamal & Raza, 2011). But despite the importance of delegation as a concept, not everyone achieves an effective delegation outcome: managers can fail to achieve their goals when they delegate, and employees can fail to achieve the goals they were delegated. Delegation, like any important feature of a business needs to be planned and structured rather than merely assuming it will emerge naturally (Kamal & Raza, 2011: 242). Understanding delegation as a concept and as a tool is important to ensuring the expectations of delegation are met.

Delegation as a Productivity Enhancer

Delegation at its heart is a tool to improve the efficient use of different organisational resources.

For example: John manages a team of IT developers - he has high skill, a high number of tasks, and limited time.

Each of his workers in comparison have – medium skill, a medium number of tasks, and limited time.

Effective delegation in this case stems from John (a more expensive resource) being able to transfer particular tasks to less skilled workers when they match the capability requirements.

It can therefore be considered both a time management tool and investment opportunity, as it allows more expensive resources to focus on more complex problems. Often delegating the work of handling non-routine problems frees up time to instead focus on business-enhancing strategic challenges (Kamal & Raza, 2011: 241). Underlying its practical use as an organisational efficiency tool, delegation is about flexibility. The goal of delegation is to increase the proportion of tasks or challenges at each level which match the skills and abilities of each individual, by reassigning mismatched work to other levels (Summers & Nowicki, 2006: 114). This can improve the opportunities to develop employees, as well as to give managers the ability to take advantage of opportunities as they arise (Aubert & Bourdeau, 2012).

Why Delegation is Essential

Matching the work with the right resources creates a range of positive benefits to organisations. Effective delegation lowers costs, improves the organisation's ability to respond to the marketplace, and increases profitability. Research by Aubert and Bourdeau (2012) found that increases in flexibility enhanced performance in:

- **Finance:** better budgetary administration
- **Human Resources:** greater ability to respond to changes in service demands
- **Administration:** ability to structure processes to meet organisational needs

Combining decentralized rights for both financial and human resources decision-making found that the benefit was increased further; it may be that the combination is complementary with managers able to focus both money and people into the programs of greatest benefit. Delegation can thus be considered a form of assigning decision-making rights to those at the most appropriate level or specialisation that are also the most willing and able to make those decisions. Those decisions can be considered across three categories: **human resources**, **financial** and **administrative** (Aubert & Bourdeau, 2012).

Barriers to Effective Delegation

Effective delegation is a balancing act between authority, ability, and support. Barriers can be created structurally such as through policies and procedures; managerially through poor understanding or implementation; or at the employee level through unwillingness or inability to accept the responsibility.

At the foundation of effective delegation is **management style**, from procedural structures to the line manager's approaches and personality. If the manager's style is for example,

strongly authoritarian, delegated work will be constantly referred back to the manager creating doubling-up of the workload (Summers & Nowicki, 2006: 115). Another barrier to delegation is when too little support is provided. This creates a situation where they abdicate their own accountability; or when they provide too much support and thereby encourage the employee to ‘reverse delegate’—that is, refer specific work tasks back to the manager to be completed before the employee can complete other tasks. Organisations can attempt to increase the controls over employees when increasing delegated authority and thus curtail the flexibility that is delegation’s biggest asset (Aubert & Bourdeau, 2012).

The willingness and ability of employees to accept delegated tasks is illustrated by the “Acceptance Theory of Authority”. This theory outlines that to accept and fulfil objectives, employees need to meet four conditions: first, they need to comprehend the assignment; second, they must consider the assignment to be sufficiently connected to the organisation’s mission; third, the assignment must be consistent with their values; and finally, they must have the skills and knowledge necessary to complete the assignment (Kamel & Raza, 2011: 247).

Implementing Delegation

To achieve your objectives, knowledge of what actions are required and the ability to measure their outcomes is integral to employing the most appropriate methods. The following performance measurements may be useful for you to adopt for your own **delegation process**:

- Improvements over **pre-established targets**
- **Annual differences** between targets and results
- **Benchmarked differences** with other comparable departments or organisations
- Ongoing stability and **predictability of improvements**
- **Intangible effects** such as employee satisfaction improvements

Whether your organisation measures its success using profitability or some other metric, the lessons from government organisations and not for profits (NFPs) can be useful for including indirect measures of productivity. For example, Aubert and Bourdeau (2012) consider the concept of ‘relative performance’ as valuable-in essence, that what is measured is not just the *absolute* performance of an individual or team, but *relative* to others; in terms of delegation, the delegation itself should improve performance relative to non-delegation.

Ultimately, the success or failure of delegation policies should be measured by the outcomes they produce rather than the adherence to rules. Indeed, the best delegation structures should promote delegation by proscription rather than prescription: in other words, proscribing boundaries that must not be crossed rather than by prescribing specific ways that things ought to be achieved.

Key points

- Effectively designed delegation of responsibilities improves productivity and profitability
- Benefits include more responsive organisations and better use of resources
- Barriers include constrictive internal policies, and poorly prepared managers and employees
- Creating and managing effective delegation needs careful planning, policies and procedures

Measuring effective delegation

Psych Press has helped companies find candidates and develop current managers that have the required competencies to delegate effectively, and identify those who may struggle. Essentially, we assess for attitudes that align themselves with your company's goals, and identify competencies that allow for effective collaboration and understanding between different staff levels. Measuring how effective a candidate or existing staff member will be in delegating tasks is essential to any strategic or staffing change. Speak to one of our consultants on +61 3 9670 0590 or email info@psychpress.com.au for more information on how we can support your management team in this way.

References

- Aubert, B.A., & Bourdeau, S. (2012) "Public Sector Performance and Decentralization of Decision Rights" in *Canadian Public Administration*, 55(4): 575+.
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