

DELEGATING DECISIONS



Three keys to delegating decisions in a way that accelerates group progress toward goals are: 1) tolerant restraint; 2) focus on goals over tactics; 3) positive tone.

What if you could find a powerful instrument for turbo-charging performance? "Turbo-charged" as measured by taking advantage of opportunities, being resilient when confronted by issues, outwitting competitors, or making lasting improvements.

Fact is, you already have heard of such a tool. Yet, more times than not, it languishes at the bottom of the leader's toolbox. The versatile instrument that lets us achieve more by doing less is: delegating decisions.

We all have seen what happens when leaders don't delegate, when they choke the reins as they drive through difficult conditions. Consider, for example, tighter rules recently imposed by airlines: if a traveler tries to change a ticket after the departure time of the first leg of his trip, he forfeits unused segments on that ticket. Whoever wrote the policy is furiously bailing red ink, but has lost perspective on the business traveler, the source of 80% of airline revenue.

Recently, Robert found he needed to change two different flights - one on United and one on Continental. Both had the forfeit policy. But the actions of the customer service reps could not have been more different.

United's rep stuck by the new policy. Saying her hands were tied, she refused to refund a \$400 ticket - even though she knew Robert would likely switch two subsequent roundtrip New York-to-London reservations to another carrier. Continental's person lectured Robert about the policy, but overrode it. Robert immediately booked his two UK trips -- one of most profitable routes in their system - with Continental.

To put it simply, what made the difference between immediate monetary relief and greater gain was the Continental employee's ability to make a decision on his own. Up the chain, management had delegated responsibility.

When leaders stop delegating, employees find themselves working under "no-win" options. They must navigate a mind-boggling proliferation of policies and procedures, kicking everything upstairs or being criticized for taking initiative. The leaders may

actually be worse off: wondering why so much of their time is spent rule-making or deciding trivial matters; getting mad that the staff are not getting the job done, or devising punitive measures - which further stifle creativity in a vicious circle.

Defies common sense, doesn't it? No leader would say those outcomes are the ones she wants.

One trait of great leaders is effective delegation - sometimes to the point where they appear not to be doing much of anything. Can you think of an example from your own experience? A time when you acted on your own initiative with nothing more than the boss's encouragement. The outcome was successful, wasn't it? And the satisfaction of getting something accomplished easily and quickly gives everyone involved a good feeling.

When leaders understand delegation, they unleash action that accelerates progress towards goals. Delegation is subtle, mysterious, simultaneously the most powerful institutional force and the most fragile. Done well, it becomes an art form. Just as talent reveals itself in those artists who have applied themselves to their craft, effective leadership is revealed by those who discipline their minds to entrust their fate to others - to delegate.

We suggest three keys to delegating decisions.

1. The first principle of delegation is forbearance - tolerant restraint. In other words, resisting the impulse to jump in with the quick rescue. Subordinates ask leaders all kinds of questions, present any variety of issues, make all manner of suggestions - they make it easy for leaders to call the shots. Making the call can be a reflex; not until later does the leader get that "oh, shoot!" feeling as he realizes that now he owns the outcome.

Keeping sole ownership of outcomes carries a heavy price. Betsy recently coached a manager working herself up from an administrative position within a medium-sized manufacturing company. Her old habits - answering every question, solving every problem, handling every assignment herself - were holding her back from promotion. More important, she was exhausted: "in the weeds and dying there." Her self-described "evil twin" was a mother compelled to take care of everyone and everything. She knew she needed to delegate, but feared that would make her seem weak or incompetent.

This all-too-typical manager was trapped until she began to see how her own assumptions about other people's reactions paralyzed her. Indeed, the key to acting with restraint is understanding our thought process.

When someone asks us to turn our attention to an issue, our thinking follows as morning follows night. Our mind generates all manner of ideas; those that provoke a

strong feeling propel us to action. Before we know it, we have given an instruction, sent the email, walked down the hall, told others what to do. Not until later do we pause and reflect on the day's events and perhaps realize that we should have taken another path.

A leader who can "see" his or her own thinking - in other words, knows that the mind produces a continuous flow of thoughts - is more apt to find the gaps between thoughts. That's where one can tap the resource of reflection, which stops knee-jerk answers.

This act of "catching one's thoughts" while they are happening creates the space to delegate responsibility. Like the offensive coordinator high above the football field, the leader has the perspective to know who is most advantageously positioned. What play is called and how well it is executed is left to others.

2. Besides forbearance, the leader who is adept at delegation has focus - she is mindful of the goals, not the tactics. What matters to her is the organization's continuous progress towards outcomes over the long run. In practical terms, this causes the leader to loosen her hold on her own right answer. From that stance, she will be astonished at the creative capability of the staff; she will prize mistakes - seizing them as teaching opportunities that deepen the organization's competence. And she will stay out of the details for most things - giving her the time to invest in the tough issues that the staff find hard to handle.

Make no mistake; we are not suggesting that the leader does not care about day-to-day actions and results. She appreciates that progress in the long run depends on the cumulative effect of many, many small actions taken one day at a time. But the leader invests relatively little of her energy in these activities. Her mental acuity is spent, instead, on strengthening the institution's capacity and on ensuring that people attend to the success variables that matter.

In one sense, the leader "jumps the boundaries of time;" to her, the future is now. Directing one's thoughts towards goals causes the future to seem just as present and tangible as the computer keys used to write this essay. Goals take form because thoughts produce feelings, and it is our feelings that provoke action.

3. Finally, the leader who delegates effectively ensures that the company's overall tone, or feeling, is positive. People avoid taking responsibility when the climate is fearful, or when stepping into situations risks retribution.

How does the leader know when he is delegating effectively? Well, for one thing his phone stops ringing; he finds far fewer emails in his inbox. People no longer feel the need to run trivial matters past him. One of GE's leaders reported that he was shocked at how quickly his organization got on with the job once they understood he was truly committed to delegation. Problems were solved at their source; opportunities were seized when they first surfaced.

Another obvious manifestation is that the staff takes ownership for results. Not only is it apparent that they care about outcomes, but also the effort that they put into their work increases. The leader feels assured that the staff will do whatever it takes to accomplish the desired results. People will take responsibility for corrective action or initiative even when the effort is not part of their formal role. They begin pointing out where they need more authority so they can act more freely and timely. What could be more thrilling?

Most important, however, is the tangible sense that the organization is raising its collective sights as to where they position the performance bar. Goals that were seen as impossible to reach suddenly fall in the "no brainer" category. Employees begin pointing out structural impediments to the boss so that he can take corrective action. And they ask for more development, for co-workers with complementary talent, and for the replacement of malcontents. The leader's job becomes more about just listening as the staff tells him what they need in order to get the job done.

Leaders know that the most important thing is for their staff to believe that they "did it themselves." In truth, that is what happens when leaders delegate effectively. An event occurs, action is taken, progress is made. Everyone - regardless of position or title - finds his or her own leadership capacity to help keep the ship on the right course.

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