

DON'T BE AFRAID TO DELEGATE

Eddie Ströh

*Department of Public Administration and
Development Studies,
University of South Africa*

ABSTRACT

Insecurity, which in turn leads to fear, is an important enemy of delegation. More and better delegation usually occurs when managers experience higher levels of security. The question, however, is what managers can do not to be afraid to delegate or to overcome any fear of failure in this regard. Apart from referring to the importance of delegation and the excuses managers sometimes use for failing to delegate, an attempt is made in this article to identify particular measures that managers can introduce to alleviate fear of delegation.

1 INTRODUCTION

The old adage that, 'If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself' does not apply anymore. Demands facing managers these days are so complex and diverse that their new role of 'getting things done *through others*' has become more relevant. Managers become more and more responsible for assessing the potential of subordinates, encouraging subordinate participation, ensuring that they get the necessary training, and developing their skills – all of which could be done successfully through the application of delegation, a core management skills. It can even be argued that delegation is so important that the real measure of a manager's effectiveness lies in his or her ability to get things done successfully through other people.

However, the effective practice of delegation should not be taken for granted. Managers often fail to delegate effectively, or even to delegate at all, because of psychological barriers. The greatest psychological barrier to delegation is fear. A manager may be afraid that if subordinates fail to do work properly, the manager's performance will suffer. Fear for the consequences of delegation makes managers sometimes argue: 'I can do it better myself', 'It takes too much time to explain what I want done', 'My subordinates are not capable'. The result is that such managers may find it difficult in future to identify a person in their institution who would be properly qualified and able to replace them effectively if an opportunity to move up the hierarchy comes along.

What can managers do to get over any fear of failure, impatience or insecurity to delegate? The answer to this question most probably lies in certain measures that managers can introduce for effective delegation. Not only may such measures make managers better delegators, it may also help them not to be afraid to try at all. This article, among other things, is an attempt to identify such measures.

2 WHAT IS DELEGATION?

Delegation is a process that permits the transfer of authority and responsibility from superior to subordinate (Hellriegel and Slocum 1989:367). This process involves three distinct but highly interrelated activities:

- **Assignment of tasks/duties:** The delegating superior indicates what work the subordinate is to do, after which the subordinate will be accountable to the superior for the satisfactory performance of such work.
- **Granting of authority:** Along with the assigned work, specific rights or authority are transferred to the subordinate to act on behalf of the superior.
- **Creation of an obligation:** In accepting a task and the authority necessary to carry out the task, the subordinate accepts an obligation or assumes responsibility on behalf of the superior to complete the task as requested.

The fact that duties may be assigned and authority granted to subordinates, does not imply that accountability to a superior can be transferred or delegated (Williams, Du Brin and Sisk 1985:254). When describing the process of delegation as the assignment of tasks, the granting of authority and the creation of an obligation, it is evident that both authority and responsibility may be transferred. In fact, it is the continuing re-delegation of authority and responsibility that makes institutions and organisational structures possible. However, accountability, that obligation to report to a superior, cannot be delegated. The superior who has delegated authority and responsibility remains accountable for the actions of his or her subordinates.

3 WHY IS DELEGATION ESSENTIAL?

Those uninitiated in delegation and those who have never succeeded in practicing this skill might well question the need for so much emphasis on delegation and the reasons for its importance. The fact is that managers who fail to delegate tasks may find that they never have enough time to complete their own work. Managers who do not delegate effectively may be unhappy with the results of their subordinates' performance and may find that their subordinates lack enthusiasm and initiative when completing delegated tasks. To determine whether they need to delegate or whether they are delegating effectively, managers should ask themselves the following questions:

- Am I regularly working overtime?
- Am I usually busier than my colleagues?
- Am I rushing to meet deadlines?
- Am I unable to complete key projects?
- Am I too busy to plan new projects or set new priorities?
- Am I greeted with volumes of unfinished work whenever I return from a holiday?
- Am I neglecting to train someone who could succeed me on short notice with a minimal break in routine?

Apart from these kinds of questions, which could be an indication of the need to delegate, the following aspects also illustrate its importance.

3.1 Delegation develops subordinates

The delegation of authority and responsibility is essential if managers are to provide opportunities for the development of their subordinates (Lisoski 1998:4). Subordinates will be convinced that they are improving their competence to perform if they have periodic opportunities to participate in institutional decisions. Through delegation, managers provide subordinates with additional challenges, broaden their experience and assist them in becoming better decision-makers. Managers who fail to delegate, deprive subordinates of opportunities to improve their knowledge and skills and to assume greater responsibility. Ultimately they may feel that they are falling behind their 'competition' in institutions where delegation does take place. This is often enough stimulus to generate a posture of *unwillingness-to-try*, or a *who-cares* attitude. It may even happen that subordinates who are the most talented – precisely the people that the manager can least afford to lose – may leave the institution in search of more challenging and supportive environments.

3.2 Delegation allows managers to achieve more

Managers who choose to do everything themselves will suffer at least three undesirable results: they hamper their own productivity; they limit their potential contribution to their institution; and any contribution they do make are often accompanied by frustration and excessive personal effort (McConkey 1986:30). One of the vital criteria for effective managers is how easy, not how difficult, they make a job. They should measure themselves by the results achieved rather than by the amount and difficulty of the effort expended. Their subordinates can help to make their jobs easier and more productive if managers know how to utilise them. Subordinates' time is less costly in comparison to that of their superiors. By delegating, managers will have more time to address and solve problems that would otherwise have cost the institution more money.

3.3 Delegation promotes satisfaction among subordinates

Effective delegation gives subordinates the chance to incorporate their values in the work environment and, in many cases, to undertake activities of special interest to them. By increasing subordinates' involvement in the workplace, the manager heightens their enthusiasm and initiative for their work. Delegation gives subordinates an opportunity to invest something of themselves in their work – giving them a feeling of owning the work as well as its outcomes. Delegation therefore enhances subordinates' sense of accomplishment and self-esteem, as it is much more rewarding to be able to congratulate oneself for a task that is well planned and executed than for another person's plan, which is merely executed. Thus, ownership of the plan is almost always more satisfying and motivating than stewardship of someone else's plan (Axley 1992:17).

3.4 Delegation builds mutual trust and confidence

Trust and confidence are fostered through successful experiences with delegated tasks. When trust is demonstrated in someone, most people reciprocate with actions that show that the trust was justified. In this way, trust enhances the prospects for delegation, which in turn enhances the prospects for trust and confidence (Axley 1992:17). Through effective delegation, a work environment can therefore be created where trust among the recipients of delegated tasks in the delegator can be promoted.

3.5 Delegation produces faster and more effective decisions

The greater the distance between the operational level and the superior to whom it reports, the greater the need for delegation to the person on the spot. Even with the dramatic advances in the speed and content of communication transmission, the chances for significant losses exist when the local manager is not empowered to act quickly. Effective delegation facilitates faster and more effective decisions. An institution is most responsive to changes in the environment when individuals closest to the problems are making the decisions aimed at resolving those problems. As individuals closest to the problem usually have the most relevant information upon which to base an intelligent decision, decision-making responsibility should be delegated downwards in the institutional hierarchy (Nelson 1988:17).

3.6 Delegation maximises output

When managers delegate tasks according to the skills and abilities of subordinates, the institution as a whole is likely to produce a higher level of output than would have been possible otherwise. Delegation can also contribute

in this regard as it gives subordinates the opportunity to offer new ideas, viewpoints and suggestions that can improve operations in the institution.

The necessity of delegation, to use the words of Axley (1992:16), can be emphasised as follows: 'Without delegation, the sad and inevitable truth is that the total resources that can be marshalled for any task – physical, intellectual, creative, problem-solving, time, etc. – are limited to those of the manager. Most of us are neither superhuman nor geniuses, and failing to delegate or delegate effectively, exposes and even magnifies these unfortunate limitations. Delegation effectively helps to nullify them.'

4 MANAGERS FAIL TO DELEGATE?

Managers who do not delegate, tend to focus more on what *they* are doing rather than what *their subordinates* could be doing. They spend more time checking details instead of confining their executive actions to more urgent matters such as policy-making, planning and leading their subordinates. Reluctant to use the knowledge and skills of subordinates, such managers often make, override or reverse subordinates' decisions – thus encouraging total dependence.

But why are managers sometimes reluctant to delegate? Surely part of the reason may be the fact that some managers are inexperienced and afraid of the possible consequences of delegation (Longenecker 1991:4). Perhaps they do not delegate because they fear that subordinates will not accept the new responsibility delegated to them. These feelings of insecurity cause them to avoid delegating.

According to Nelson (1988:23–50), the following examples are the most common excuses managers sometimes use for not delegating:

- Managers sometimes prefer to perform activities themselves, thus knowing that these have been done well. They feel that no one can do the work like them. There is always a possibility that subordinates will not do the task properly. Ego therefore plays a definite role.
- Some managers believe that delegating responsibilities will threaten their own positions. They feel that their own positions will become less important because their subordinates will have the authority to achieve the necessary results.
- Lack of confidence in subordinates or in their own ability to delegate is another important reason why managers are sometimes reluctant to delegate.
- Managers sometimes argue that inadequate control measures in the institution make it impossible for them to delegate, because it may allow for activities to be carried out ineffectively and inefficiently without them being aware of it.
- Sometimes managers believe that delegation will cause overlapping of activities and will make coordination more difficult.
- Managers sometimes argue that delegation will fragment objectives (divide them into too many sub-objectives).

- Some managers believe that their subordinates lack experience.
- Managers sometimes argue that it takes more time to explain to subordinates how to do the tasks that have been delegated than to do the work themselves.
- By virtue of their positions in the hierarchy, managers sometimes believe that they can get a quicker response.
- Sometimes managers argue that their subordinates are specialists in their respective fields and do not have the general knowledge required for some responsibilities.
- Managers sometimes also argue that their subordinates are too busy and have no time for additional duties.

Managers have to be honest with themselves about the reasons why they do not want to delegate. Those who maintain a decided preference not to delegate, must weigh the advantages and disadvantages of such a preference against their personal and professional objectives. In doing so, they need to ask themselves the following questions:

- Who is responsible for provoking and maintaining the interest of subordinates in their work?
- Who is responsible for ensuring that subordinates are fully competent in what they do?
- Who is at fault when it takes an unduly long time for subordinates to understand and appreciate instructions?
- Who is responsible to maintain good order and discipline at all times?

Goodworth (1985:31) emphasises that these tasks are the managers' responsibility. In fact, should managers fail to execute them properly, they are guilty, not only of under-delegation, but of dire mismanagement as well (Goodworth 1985:31). Effective managers therefore need to come to grips with the risks, real and imagined, involved in delegation. They must learn to delegate in a way that is comfortable for themselves, as well as for their subordinates. To accomplish this, however, they should not be afraid of delegation.

5 WHAT MEASURES CAN MANAGERS INTRODUCE TO ALLEVIATE FEAR OF DELEGATION?

Delegation is one of the paradoxes of management. It is a simple concept, yet it is often difficult for managers to execute effectively. However, there are particular measures that can be introduced to make delegation easier and more effective.

5.1 Develop the right attitudes

To be truly effective at delegating, managers must have the correct (positive) attitudes about delegation (Nelson 1988:54–58). These attitudes include:

- Personal security: Managers who lack confidence in their abilities do not delegate or do not delegate sufficiently because they are afraid of being exposed or of surrendering control (Brown 1998:76). Managers who delegate effectively, on the other hand, can feel secure about their position in the institution and can have a positive attitude about assigning tasks to others.
- Willingness to take risks: To be effective at delegating, managers must be willing to take risks in getting tasks done, like allowing subordinates to make important decisions. Managers must be willing to accept and learn from failure when it occurs (Lindo 1999:8).
- Trust in subordinates: When delegating a task, managers must be willing to trust others to perform tasks for which they will be held accountable. This trust must be granted even though the manager is fully aware of the limitations of each subordinate. Subordinates must be allowed to supply, without interference, their own ideas on how an assignment should be completed.
- Patience: Managers who delegate effectively realise that delegation may not produce immediate results. They allow time in the schedule for inexperienced subordinates to be trained. Although they are aware of what needs to be done, they do not force subordinates to do the work in a specific way. They are willing to allow subordinates to make full use of the opportunity to attempt tasks in their own way.

5.2 Select a suitable employee for the task

Some managers who find themselves faced with having to delegate, sometimes do it in a haphazard fashion. Faced with a crisis, they may throw out challenges to subordinates in desperation. Some subordinates may be able to pick up the ball and run with it. Others may not, which can have disastrous consequences for the institution.

Effective delegation rather requires managers '... to size up each subordinate in terms of strengths and weaknesses and to consider these differences when making the delegation' (McConkey 1986:82). In other words, delegation must be matched to the levels of competence of the persons performing the task. Together with the person's abilities, the importance of the task must also be considered. If the task is one that must be done rapidly and with little supervision, a person should be selected who has demonstrated an ability in the past to undertake this type of work. However, if it is an area providing adequate time to offer guidance, it may be advantageous to assign it to a less skilled person and use this opportunity as a means of training and developing such a person's skills.

Weiss (2000:4) suggests the following guidelines that managers could use to analyse possible candidates to whom tasks can be delegated:

- Is the person alert and active?
- Is the person organised?

- Does the person cooperate with his or her superiors and colleagues?
- Does the person show sufficient self-control?
- Is the person willing to accept more responsibility?
- Does the person adjust easily to change?

In applying these guidelines to select a suitable employee for the task, managers must avoid the trap of delegating to a few select individuals only – usually those most capable of handling a task. They must remember that delegation is an important aid for assessing potential, training and development. It would be advisable to spread delegation around to identify everyone's capabilities and to train and develop the maximum number of employees. A balance between the outcomes of these guidelines and the creation of opportunities for those who need training and development therefore needs to be established.

5.3 Set clear and meaningful objectives

If managers dump tasks on subordinates without, among others, clarifying exactly what is to be done, the expected level of performance and deadlines for completion, they are abdicating responsibility and inviting trouble. When objectives are not clear and realistic, the tendency among subordinates may be to do nothing or to proceed waisting time on taking needless risks of making errors. 'Vagueness destroys the whole purpose of delegation and leaves staff confused' (Muir 1995:6). Effective delegation therefore requires sound managerial judgement in the setting of objectives. Managers should be mindful of the following in this regard:

- Objectives have to be unambiguous and specific rather than generalised or vague (Capozzoli 1997:16). Vague instructions to subordinates such as 'to do their best' should be avoided. Objectives should rather be measurable. Objectives that are not measurable become merely subjective indications of how a task should be performed and help neither the subordinate nor the manager. If managers cannot measure objectives, they will find it really difficult to manage them. Specific measureable objectives give subordinates a powerful reason for wanting to perform well as this serve as a yardstick of relative success.
- Subordinates should be clearly instructed on the priority of the task in relation to other functions. It must be clear to them what tasks must be performed without error and what tasks must be performed exactly on time. They must be able to distinguish the critical duties from the not so critical.
- Breaking broad objectives into sub-objectives can be particularly helpful in stimulating a subordinate's sense that effort leads to performance. Sub-objectives serve as intermediate completion points or checkpoints. Clear intermediate completion points provide relatively frequent experiences of achievement and result in feelings of satisfaction among subordinates. The

achievement of sub-objectives also helps subordinates verify that their efforts are on track and that continued efforts will ultimately result in achievement of the broad objectives (Grant 1990:46).

- Management should spell out the consequences of not meeting an objective (Grensing 1991:47). If there are no consequences, subordinates may feel that it really makes no difference whether they do what management ask or not.
- Meaningful objectives contribute to more effective delegation. People want to feel important and needed. They want to believe they are making a contribution. Delegating meaningless assignments and treating subordinates as if they are immature kids will not serve the purpose of delegation (McConkey 1986:82).
- Unless there is an overriding need to adhere to specific methods, managers must try to focus on the end results that are to be achieved rather than trying to delegate the method for achieving the results. If managers focus primarily on the objectives to be achieved and allow subordinates the freedom to use their own judgement of *how* those objectives should be achieved, subordinates will learn more, take more initiative and have greater enthusiasm for delegated tasks (Nelson 1988:79).

5.4 Allow subordinates to participate

The most effective delegation does not flow from the superior to the subordinate only. It flows both ways in the sense that managers who strive to improve their delegating ability will give the widest possible latitude to subordinates to *participate* in determining what is delegated to them, how much authority is needed to get the job done, what level of achievement is expected, and when achievement is expected (McConkey 1986:102).

Managers should be alert to the fact, however, that participation can present its own potential problems. Some subordinates, for instance, may strive to expand their authority beyond what they need and what they are capable of handling. Allowing them too much participation in deciding what tasks should be delegated to them and how much authority they will need to complete the tasks, can undermine the effectiveness of the delegation process.

5.5 Provide subordinates with sufficient authority

Providing subordinates with sufficient authority becomes a major stumbling block when there is even the slightest reluctance to delegate. Most managers are willing to hand out assignments to their subordinates. However, all of them are not equally willing to transfer their own authority to subordinates (Mconkey 1986:169). Managers must give subordinates the level of authority commensurate with the requirements of the assignment; in other words, they must give them the authority necessary to fulfil the responsibility that they were given (Nelson

1988:166). The goal is to enable subordinates to complete the task, to make independent decisions, to take initiative, and to continue working in the absence of the manager. With little or no authority, the subordinate will be either unable to handle the assignment effectively or will be limited to the method the manager prescribed for achieving the objective. By granting too much authority, the manager might feel uneasy about the subordinate making a mistake that can be costly in terms of time and money. 'To be effective, there must be an absolute transfer of power within the agreed-upon parameters. If the superior withholds even the smallest degree of authority within the agreed-upon limits, the delegation is going to suffer' (McConkey 1986:107).

5.6 Do not overload subordinates

When delegating, managers should take into account the workload that subordinates will be able to cope with. They should prevent overloading subordinates with work – too much to do in a given period of time or too many different tasks to do – as this may make them feel that doing the job right is next to impossible, which can have a negative impact on their motivation to do well. Managers should strive to delegate gradually instead of dumping a wide range of assignments on a subordinate at one time. Forcing the subordinate to assume too much responsibility at one time, can thwart the benefits of delegation, especially when the subordinate is new in the job or has never received much delegated responsibilities in the past.

In order to prevent overloading subordinates, managers need to resolve the following questions with them:

- How has the subordinate arranged his or her work?
- Has he or she determined priorities?
- How does he or she manage time?
- Has he or she delegated to his or her subordinates, if applicable?

5.7 Delegate the good and the bad

Managers should guard against keeping the pleasant, more exciting tasks for themselves while delegating the boring, trivial or unappealing tasks to their subordinates. Subordinates quickly realise what the manager is doing and the respect they once had for the person may start to wane. It is necessary to maintain a balance between highly and less desirable tasks according to an individual employee's abilities and interests.

Managers, however, should not be afraid to delegate the less appealing work. There are times that less desirable tasks have to be delegated. Some managers feel guilty about delegating undesirable tasks and instead, do it themselves, which may not always represent an efficient use of their time. The crux of the matter is

that both pleasant and unpleasant tasks should be considered for delegation (Mondy and Premeaux 1995:242).

5.8 Build friendship with subordinates

Managers who are unapproachable, unfriendly and demanding often create fear or resentment in people. Such managers should not expect to get the cooperation they really want from their subordinates. Subordinates are more likely to listen to a manager who is a friend, to accept directions from such a manager and to be motivated because of the friendship (Grant 1990:80). Friendship builds trust and respect. No one likes to disappoint a friend. If a manager is a friend of his or her subordinates, those subordinates are likely to perform well in the execution of their delegated tasks otherwise they may feel they have let him or her down.

Managers can develop a friendship with their subordinates by treating them as equals on and off the job, by sharing interests with them, by inviting them to engage in social activities, by showing that they enjoy being with them in both on and off the job situations, and by helping them with personal problems and concerns. Managers, however, will undermine trust and respect in the manager-subordinate relationship if they make a habit of correcting work that has been completed by their subordinates, to work on a task themselves although they have assigned it to a subordinate, or to re-do the entire assignment after the subordinate has completed it.

5.9 Give continuous support

Once an assignment has been delegated, the manager's role should be primarily one of support and minimum personal involvement (Baston 1991:49). This implies that the subordinate should be allowed to get on with the task in his or her own way, but within the parameters defined by the manager, knowing that he or she is available for support. In supporting subordinates, managers should prevent answering too many questions and solve too many problems when the subordinate should display the initiative. Effective delegation requires that people answer their own questions and solve their own problems as far as possible.

Giving continuous support means the manager must:

- make sure that the subordinate understands what is expected of him or her;
- help the subordinate to reach the objective by providing staff assistance and tools as needed;
- give the subordinate advice, counsel and correction without taking away any part of his or her responsibility and authority;
- encourage the subordinate to develop alternatives for action rather than simply to ask for solutions to problems as they arise; and
- inform everyone involved in the task, or affected by it, that the task has been delegated and that the person has the necessary authority to do it.

An important facet in supporting subordinates is to share information with them. Neglecting to share information with subordinates, for instance, about the importance of delegation, why it is necessary for the institution and what outcomes can be expected, they probably will see delegation as just another management ploy to increase their workload. They will not trust that delegation will really occur, and if it does, they will not be sure whether it is for the right reasons. The positive impact of information-sharing on delegation, is illustrated by Blanchard, Carlos and Randolph (1999:58):

By sharing information in small doses at first, you will see people grow in responsibility and accountability. You will also see them grow in their trust of leadership. Both of these outcomes will lead to team members feeling a sense of partnership and involvement and wanting to use information to improve company performance. And they will surprise you with positive results generated by their problem solving skills. Then when they ask for more information, you will feel more comfortable sharing.

5.10 Monitor and evaluate progress and provide feedback on performance

Managers should monitor and evaluate the progress of a task that has been delegated. Monitoring a delegated task helps managers to identify problems and deviations as they arise. By comparing actual results with established standards, areas of existing and potential problems can be highlighted. Managers should also appraise the completed task and discuss the evaluation with their subordinates. When evaluating a delegated task, managers need to determine whether the task was completed as intended in a timely manner, whether the subordinate was able to handle the level of authority that was granted, and what can be done to delegate such a task better in the future.

When monitoring and evaluating delegated tasks, managers should be mindful of the following:

- They must be careful not to create the impression that they continually look over the subordinate's shoulder merely to prevent mistakes. This can have a negative effect on delegation. Subordinates must rather gain the impression that they are responsible and in control.
- Managers must be careful in how subordinates are handled when they make mistakes. Coming down on the subordinate aggressively whenever he or she does not perform well, may cause him or her to be reluctant to accept delegated tasks in future. While poor performance should never be ignored, it should be dealt with in a positive fashion, concentrating on it being a learning experience, not as an opportunity to attack the subordinate.
- Managers often prefer to give positive feedback to subordinates when performance has met or exceeded expectations. However, managers are

sometimes reluctant to have frank discussions with the subordinate when poor performance is involved. The success of future delegation requires that poor performance should be dealt with in a timely, factual manner (McConkey 1986:132). If managers neglect to do this, it is quite likely that the subordinate – not knowing that specific problem areas exist – will continue to make similar mistakes.

- Insisting upon increasingly better performance without recognising it will result in only short-term gains. If the subordinate performs well and receives insufficient recognition, his or her motivation to continue to perform well in future may lessen. Thus, the delegator should use every possible means to give credit where it is due, at least thanking a subordinate for his or her effort and showing that quality work does not go unnoticed.

6 CONCLUSION

Managers must realise that delegation is not an easy task – some risk is inherent when responsibility is delegated and some degree of error and misjudgement is usually inevitable. The probability of finding errors in the workplace is highly likely whenever humans are involved. If subordinates do make mistakes rather than blame the concept of delegation, it should be investigated whether the particular subordinate was equipped or not, at that time, to cope with that specific task. Errors can be rectified. Being afraid to delegate or finding excuses for not delegating, should not prevail. The probability is high that, without delegation, the pressures of work and responsibility on the manager will continue to grow to the point where he or she becomes ineffective.

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Eddie Ströh
Department of Public Administration and Development Studies
University of South Africa
P O Box 392
Unisa
0003
South Africa
Email:strohec@unisa.ac.za