

Delegating Responsibility

If you are the president of an organization, the chair of a committee, or a person responsible for a project or program, there may be times when you feel like you're doing all of the work yourself. Well, perhaps you are! As the leader of your group, you are the one that people will contact with problems and concerns. This naturally increases your workload. Also, since you have chosen to assume a leadership position, you probably enjoy the work you do and want to be involved in most everything that affects your group. But trying to do it all yourself can have negative consequences for you and your organization.

A truly effective leader is able to appropriately pass work along to other people to perform. Being able to delegate responsibilities is an important skill that can be learned. It will help to make you a better leader, as well as increasing the vitality of your organization.

Why Should I Delegate?

Delegating tasks to other people in your organization can have positive outcomes for you, your members, and your group. Delegation:

- Prevents leader "burn out"
- Distributes the workload so more can be accomplished
- Allows more people to be involved in the organization
- Motivates people by giving them responsibility
- Keeps people interested and committed
- Insures the most appropriate person is performing a task
- Gives members experience in leadership roles.

If delegation is such a good idea, why don't people do it more?

There are several reasons why a leader may be reluctant to delegate tasks. For example, leaders may:

- Like following the routine of always doing it themselves
- Have difficulty letting go of tasks
- Lack confidence in members
- Be disorganized and can't figure out what to delegate
- Want all the work done their way
- Prefer to avoid the risk of involving someone else

A leader who experiences one or more of these reactions to delegating may be interfering with the long-term stability of his or her group. Examine your own style to see if any of these things apply to you. If so, they will need to be addressed before you can learn to delegate effectively.

Are there times when delegation might not work?

Yes. The situations listed below are "red flags" and should be taken care of before trying to delegate:

- Low member morale
- An unstable organization
- High conflict among members
- No resources to carry out projects

What kinds of tasks can I delegate?

Here are some tasks that are ideal to have someone else perform:

- Tasks for which someone in the group has a special talent
- Detail work that can be taught to someone

- Tasks that someone has expressed a special interest in doing
- Routine matters that repeat over and over
- Tasks that provide an opportunity for personal growth

Are there tasks that shouldn't be delegated?

Definitely. These are some of the things you should expect to do yourself:

- Confidential matters involving trust, confidence, morale
- Issues that involve setting policy
- Attendance at an "unfriendly" meeting
- Tasks only you can do by nature of your position
- Projects in which the risk of failure is high
- Jobs where the consequences of failure are very negative
- Highly controversial matters
- Tasks you just don't want to do yourself
- Work requiring immediate action

How do I find someone to take on a task?

Depending upon the situation, you might want to consider one of these methods:

1. Give it to someone who has shown the interest or skills to accomplish the task. This is the most effective way, but you must keep alert to find members who fall into this category.
2. Ask for volunteers. This assumes that the task is one that anyone can perform. This method also entails the risk that no one will volunteer.
3. Suggest that a particular member accept the task. This is a good way to build confidence in a member who is too shy to volunteer. Be sure to give the member the option to turn down the assignment.
4. Form a committee to do it. This might be useful if the task is a very large one. Committees can be very inefficient, so this method entails a lot of follow-up supervision.

OK. I'm convinced. But how do I go about delegating something?

1. Identify an appropriate task as discussed above. Be sure to select an entire task rather than bits and pieces.
2. Find someone to take on the task using one of the methods above. Be sure that the individual has the minimum skills for the job and that he/she has the time and interest.
3. Make available sufficient resources to complete the task. Be clear how much authority is being given to make decisions.
4. Discuss the assignment thoroughly. Give "helpful hints," but let the individual choose how the task will be completed. Agree upon clear outcomes, quality, and deadlines.
5. Establish periodic "check-ins." this assures that a person isn't being left to "sink or swim." Use this time to answer questions, offer advice if asked, give honest feedback, and share relevant information that has come your way.
6. Outside of these "check-ins," stay out. This is a way to communicate confidence in a person's ability.
7. Allow mistakes. If there is a problem, work cooperatively on solving it. DON'T take the task back or reassign it. See what solutions the person has before offering your own.
8. At the end of the project, review the results. Examine any problems that occurred to see if they could have been avoided. Discuss other tasks the individual would like to take on.

9. Reward completed work. This may be as simple as a public "thank you" to the individual.

I've had some negative experiences with delegation. What happened?

Delegation often fails for these reasons:

- The task was not communicated clearly
- The member taking on the task wasn't interested
- The member didn't have the appropriate skills
- The member didn't have enough time
- There were insufficient resources for the task
- The member wasn't really given the authority for the task

Most of these things can be avoided by taking extra care in the process of delegation. But if problems do arise, be sure to examine what happened and to discuss ways to do a better job in the future. Delegation is an important part of leadership and deserves the full attention of you and your members.

Adapted from material developed by the Student Activities and Services Office, San Jose State University.