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Perfecting the fine art of delegating

by Lisa van de Geyn



Delegating—or the act of entrusting a task to another person—isn't just a “nice to have” at work; it's a must for business evolution and employee engagement, says Bonnie O'Toole, a business trainer and president of Market Pursuits, a consulting firm in Halifax. It's a way to manage time more efficiently, it can result in less stress and more job satisfaction, and it's an outlet managers can use to juggle responsibilities in order to work on larger projects.

But that doesn't mean delegation is easy to do. We often feel we can work quicker, more effectively and, ultimately, do a better job ourselves. But Frank Auddino, a business consultant and president of Ajax, Ont.-based Vitaliz (a company that coaches clients on management and inclusion in the workplace), speaks from personal experience when he encourages clients to look at it another way. “As an executive who started out not really delegating, I quickly recognized that to truly accomplish business objectives, I had to take a step back and allow my employees to do their jobs,” he says. “You cannot and should not do it all. That's not a recipe for success for anything we do in life.”

Here are six ways to help you master the necessary art of efficient delegating.

1 Be specific

Let teammates know exactly what you want, including deliverables, timelines and other guidelines. Avoid having to solve problems later on by conducting a super-thorough and well-defined handoff. Also, be clear about how their contribution is important to the overall assignment. “Delegating is not splitting up workloads,” Auddino says. “It's sharing components of the activities required on a project to achieve that bigger, unified vision.”

2 Remain accountable

“Proper delegating means retaining responsibility while coaching someone else to do the task,” O'Toole says. Most experts recommend starting with a small assignment that isn't critical or time-sensitive—something that will help everyone get used to the process.

3 Don't dump tasks

Here's a good rule of thumb: Don't routinely dole out menial tasks that you wouldn't want to do yourself (like, say, collating thousands of sales kits). Make sure the employee is qualified to handle the job and never give someone work that you must complete on your own (performance reviews, confidential reports, client meetings, etc.).

4 Be proactive and available

Ensure the team has what they'll need to do the job, and be ready to answer questions and provide clarity. Encourage them to bring any issues your way early on so their work stays on track.

5 Give them a break

This advice doesn't just apply to remembering that mistakes happen—it should also remind you to cut those apron strings and let the team do their thing. (Trying to read a colleague's monitor as you're walking to the restroom doesn't convey trust.) “Rest easily in delegating—whoever you've chosen as the quarterback can work without you looking over his shoulder,” advises Auddino.

6 Trust in team

“You must trust your teammates, and you must trust that they'll be accountable,” Auddino says. If you don't yet know the strengths and weaknesses of your colleagues, spend time learning who excels in certain areas (as well as your own fortes and flaws) so you can farm out accordingly. *