Exponential Consulting Leadership Topic

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Delegation

By Stephen Billing

As a manager it is important to be able to ask people to do things in a way which invites their willingness to accept. It is not much good if your people resent you asking them to take on activities, or if in the process you inadvertently put them down or if they feel manipulated or that they are being asked to do more than their share.

Like many things in management, it is worth taking some time to reflect on how you hand tasks over to people, and to practice the skills so that you are eventually effortlessly able to get people to willingly take on the things that need to be done.

Nowhere in management is your relationship with your people more important than in the art of delegation. A good relationship with your team members leads to good delegation. And good delegation can help you build good relationships with your team – a kind of virtuous circle.

But what does it mean to have a good relationship with your team? The best relationships between managers and staff are not necessarily based on being best friends. Research shows that staff want from their managers clarity about expectations, the ability to influence their own work, and feedback on how they are doing. So concentrate on those things, not on being "mates." No doubt it was in your first management job that you realized how you had to change your relationships with your former peers.

Delegating tasks to your team is an ideal opportunity to provide all of the things your people are seeking in a good relationship with their manager. Delegation can also help you develop a top performing team. But achieving this sort of amazing result requires more than just giving any old task to the first warm body you can find.

I find it helpful to think of what to do before, during and after delegating a task. The time you spend on thinking about this will help you do it right, and in the process, gain a reputation as a great manager.

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First of all, what tasks to delegate? In other words, what could others do to help get the work done? There are three "magic questions" to ask yourself, especially if you are finding yourself running around like a headless chicken, overwhelmed with tasks but concerned that you are not making progress with the important things. To be a master delegator, you have to stop thinking about your work as being something that only you can do, and think differently about your work. These three "magic questions" will help you make the required mind shift.

1. What are you doing that members of your team could help you with?
2. What do you do that your team members could do with a little help from you?
3. What do you do that your team members could do by themselves?

Firstly, think of those important things that you are not getting to. No doubt they require several stages that can be broken down. Perhaps a team member could help you with one or more of the stages of the project. This would have the advantage not only of developing the team member, but of getting some action happening on the project.

Secondly, do you have any less complex tasks that you can turn over to someone to do, with you providing support? All of your work tasks are candidates for this category, you just have to think laterally enough. For example, rostering of people or scheduling of work are potential candidates. If your work comes in centrally and needs to be allocated to the team, or if you have a roster to organize, then chances are you can get someone in your team to do this with help from you. People respond well to this kind of responsibility and it is good for their CV for them to be able to show they have taken on responsibilities like these.

Thirdly, what things you are doing that a team member could do themselves. Do you have to gather regular information for your monthly reports, collate statistics, organize team meetings or follow up after team meetings? These kinds of activities lend themselves brilliantly to getting help from your team members. , while developing their skills and sense of responsibility at the same time. For example, you can rotate the chairing of your team meetings including scheduling and organising them, and following up on action points afterwards. You can also ask someone to follow up on collecting performance data or turn their information in on time so that reports can be completed as scheduled.

The next question to ask yourself is who to delegate these things to. Again, there are three things to consider here:

1. For whom would this be an opportunity for development?
2. Who has a strength in this area?
3. Whose turn is it? (Thinking here about sharing the work equitably).

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Having decided on what work can be delegated and who to, the next question is how to approach the person in such a way that they are likely to agree. Here are some ideas about how to do this. The key is to work out what is in the other person's self interest:

- Describe the importance of the results, not the process itself.
- Identify the development of skills involved for the person.
- Explain how this task contributes to team results.
- Describe why the person is the best one to do it (availability, skills, strengths, development)
- Explain what else what will be able to be accomplished by you and other team members if this task is taken care of..
- Describe the seriousness of the problem to be solved.

Monitoring Progress

Once you have outlined to the person what it is that you want to achieve, it is critical to agree how success will be monitored. Remember that anything you agree will be excellent input into their performance review.

The most important thing here is to get them to work out their plan and to tell you what it is. This means that you tell them what outcome is required and ask them to tell you how they will achieve that outcome. In other words, you tell them the outcome that your unit must achieve and ask them t o work out a plan to achieve it. You may help them to work out the plan. I am a big fan of giving the other person the opportunity to work out the plan for themselves, or else developing the plan together with them. If the other person is new to the job, relatively inexperienced, or if I haven't worked with them before, I like to ask them to come up with a plan that we can agree upon.

For most projects, I have found there are three ways of monitoring. The first is to agree to check in together at a certain regular period of monitoring, for example once a week. You will have to decide the frequency based on the task and the person involved. In general I like weekly check-ins but I have had occasions where I have required team to check in with me daily.

The other main check-in process I use for monitoring, apart from a regular weekly (or daily) check in, is to report as milestones are achieved, for example when the first draft is completed. This approach requires a more established relationship of trust with the other person.

The milestone approach is based on achievement of results i.e. the milestones. I am very happy with this approach when the person is experienced and we have clear agreements about what is to be achieved.

Otherwise, a more regular reporting-in frequency gives me a greater level of comfort about the project's ability to achieve its results.

Feedback / Follow Up

A step that is often missed is to follow up after a delegated task or project is completed. This is important when you consider that, according to Lominger, 70% of reported development takes place through challenging tasks. Here are four useful questions to consider asking:

1. Tell me, what did you learn from this task or project?
2. What do you think went well?
3. What would you do differently next time?
4. What do you need from me to help you?

An important rule of thumb in following up is not to ask a question you already know the answer to.

Something else that is often not considered, is giving them a second shot at the task. In other words, getting them another opportunity to do the job enables them to put what they learnt the first time into action, and they will be better at it the second time.

Summary

If you find yourself too busy, not getting everything done that you need to do, then consider the three magic questions that will free up your time and develop your people at the same time.

1. What are you doing that members of your team could help you with?
2. What do you do that your team members could do with a little help from you?
3. What do you do that your team members could do by themselves?

Think carefully about how you will brief the person and set up the monitoring process when you do the initial briefing. Stick to your monitoring method and frequency. And then have a debrief afterwards. Remember too, to give them a second shot at the task.

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