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Delegation

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Delegating to Knowledge Workers

In 1969, in his book 'The Age of Discontinuity', Peter F. Drucker coined the term 'knowledge worker':

> *'The knowledge worker is not a laborer; he is not a subordinate in the sense that he can be told what to do; he is paid, on the contrary, for applying his knowledge, exercising his judgement and taking responsible leadership.'*

Drucker was, in effect, capturing a fundamental shift in the role that managers play in organizations – from supervisor or administrator to highly trained, intelligent, and, above all, **responsible** managerial professional. He developed the concept of 'Management By Objectives' (MBO) that still forms the basis of appraisal and reward systems today. Focusing on objective measures of performance was an important change from being dependent on the subjective judgement of your boss about how 'good' he thought you were.

It was not always like that. In 1911, Frederick W. Taylor published 'The Principles of Scientific Management'. His minute examination of every single movement and action of a worker allowed managers to break traditional jobs down into significantly more efficient tasks. This influenced Henry Ford's model of mass production through standardization. Whilst extremely efficient and revolutionary in its impact on manufacturing (Ford cut the time required to make a car from fourteen hours to two), this scientific approach led to a dehumanizing reliance on measurement. Managers planned the work; laborers did the work.

What Henry Ford did for the shop floor worker; Alfred P. Sloan arguably did for management during his time at the helm of General Motors. His policy of 'federal decentralization' developed clearly segmented divisions that were each responsible for all their business operations. He once said,

> **"The most important thing I ever learned about management is that the work must be done by other men."**

and whilst more sophisticated business models have since been developed, he pioneered the concept of delegation.

Delegation is the principal way you build a company. It is not just another management skill- it is one of the manager's core capabilities that determine his or her success or failure. Yet for most managers, it can feel unnatural and uncomfortable, and effective delegation skills usually take years to develop. Most employees are promoted to management positions because they are intelligent, hardworking, and ambitious, and therefore have achieved high levels of performance within their area of specialization. Once you become a manager, delegating to people when you know you could do the job faster and more effectively yourself can be counter-intuitive. The cry of "I haven't got time to delegate" rings through organizations around the world.

This is a problem for two reasons. Firstly, such an attitude is inherently demotivating to your direct reports. Secondly, if you are not saying 'no' to the activities that can be delegated to others, you are implicitly saying 'no' to the broader strategic issues that will allow you to develop yourself, your direct reports, and the organization. You are always saying 'no' to something.

In the era of the knowledge worker, simply working hard and being busy is not enough for success, yet, increasingly, managers can spend almost every waking hour being busy without achieving anything of strategic value for themselves and their organizations.

Technical vs. Adaptive Challenges

Some managers think that their job is to solve the problems of their direct reports. Whilst such 'firefighting' can be rewarding in the short-term ("my department couldn't survive without me"), it builds a dependence on the manager that prevents employees from taking responsibility for business results. In most organizations, employees intuitively know that the most effective way of rising up through the organization is to become indispensable. This may mean developing key client contacts or unique skills or knowledge that mean that, during tough times, you are difficult to get rid of, and, during good times, you are in a strong negotiating position when it comes to discussing pay raises and bonuses. Whilst such logic is undeniably true for more junior employees, there comes a tipping point in every organization where being indispensable becomes a liability.

At more senior levels, if you are 'indispensable' in your role, few leaders are going to promote you, as you are too valuable in your current role. Those managers that develop employees to take over their own position tend to be the ones that get promoted fastest. However, this is not a straight-forward issue, as becoming 'dispensable' has its own obvious risks! It takes a lot of confidence to say to a boss, "I've done my job so effectively that my number two is ready and able to take up my role, what new challenges do you have for me?" Many managers assume that the reason they have been promoted to a more senior role is that they were good at their last role, so carry on behaving in the same way as before, but perhaps with even more determination. Yet the behaviors that lead to success at one level in an organization will lead to problems at a more senior level. You are **never** promoted into a more senior role because you were good at your last job – it is always a 'leap of faith' with the hope that you will be able to develop new skills and adapt to the new role.

This dilemma was captured by Ron Heifetz and Donald Laurie in their article in the Harvard Business Review, 'The Work of Leadership' (January-February 1997). They draw a distinction between the conventional approach of 'technical challenge' and the increasing need for a focus on 'adaptive challenges'. For example, in relation to heart disease, the technical challenge is to produce more effective drugs and surgical procedures for treating the disease. However, the adaptive challenge is to develop ways of changing people's attitudes to diet, exercise and smoking to ensure that they don't need the drugs or surgery:

> "Changes in societies, markets, customers, competition, and technology around the globe are forcing organizations to clarify their values, develop new strategies, and learn

new ways of operating. Often the toughest task for leaders in effecting change is mobilizing people throughout the organization to do adaptive work.

Adaptive work is required when our deeply held beliefs are challenged, when the values that made us successful become less relevant, and when legitimate yet competing perspectives emerge. We see adaptive challenges every day at every level of the workplace- when companies restructure or reengineer, develop or implement strategy, or merge businesses. We see adaptive challenges when marketing has difficulty working with operations, when cross functional teams don't work well, or when senior executives complain, "We don't seem to be able to execute effectively."' Adaptive problems are often systemic problems with no ready answers.

Mobilizing an organization to adapt its behaviors in order to thrive in new business environments is critical. Without such change, any company today would falter. Indeed, getting people to do adaptive work is the mark of leadership in a competitive world. Yet for most senior executives, providing leadership and not just authoritative expertise is extremely difficult. Why? We see two reasons. First, in order to make change happen, executives have to break a long-standing behavior pattern of their own: providing leadership in the form of solutions. This tendency is quite natural because many executives reach their positions of authority by virtue of their competence in taking responsibility and solving problems. But the locus of responsibility for problem solving when a company faces an adaptive challenge must shift to its people. Solutions to adaptive challenges reside not in the executive suite but in the collective intelligence of employees at all levels, who need to use one another as resources, often across boundaries, and learn their way to those solutions.

Second, adaptive change is distressing for the people going through it. They need to take on new roles, new relationships, new values, new behaviors, and new approaches to work. Many employees are ambivalent about the efforts and sacrifices required of them. They often look to the senior executive to take problems off their shoulders. But those expectations have to be unlearned. Rather than fulfilling the expectation that they will provide answers, leaders have to ask tough questions. Rather than protecting people from outside threats, leaders should allow them to feel the pinch of reality in order to stimulate them to adapt. Instead of orienting people to their current roles, leaders must disorient them so that new relationships can develop. Instead of quelling conflict, leaders have to draw the issues out. Instead of maintaining norms, leaders have to challenge "the way we do business" and help others distinguish immutable values from historical practices that must go."

The following suggestions for 'how to delegate' outline an approach that helps managers to focus on adaptive challenges. It encourages direct reports to break the cycle of dependence that limits motivation and effectiveness in organizations through becoming more self-reliant and responsible – both for their own work, and their contribution to achieving the broader organizational goals.

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How to Delegate

Setting Up the 'Role Contract'

The process of delegation beings at the recruitment stage in a company – who you choose to delegate to. Being clear and explicit at this stage as to the expectations you have of the employee is critical.

Every employee is taking up a role – often, particularly as we get more senior, the role is complex and emergent over time. This simply increases the need to spend time agreeing the role contract – **what does success look like for them in this role?**

Agree with each employee:

1. Each person's role and the area of responsibility and authority, including the cultural norms (which behaviors the leaders of the organization approve and disapprove of), performance standards and how the role is aligned with the strategic ambition of the organization.

2. The minimum that they will be held accountable for. This should be concrete and measurable in quantity and quality. The more specific you are the easier it will be ultimately to produce what is required.

3. The support network – what are the communication lines open to them?

4. The resources that they will have to do the job, including other staff, equipment, budgets, training etc. Even if the answer is 'no resources', it is usually better to be explicit upfront rather than avoid something that you think might be demotivating.

5. When you want to hold progress meetings, appraisal meetings and what information you will require from each other and when.

If you have not already done so, agree each of these points as soon as possible. If you have already done this, then review the details of the agreement every ninety days, as changes in the company usually affect relationships and responsibilities.

Authority, Responsibility & Accountability

When delegating, you are appointing someone else to act on your behalf.

Authority:	the power to command, make final decisions, reward or punish
Responsibility:	being the primary agent or initiator
Accountability:	being liable, chargeable or answerable

Delegation is a two-way agreement involving all three concepts. Authority and responsibility flow down from the boss to the subordinate. Accountability flows up from the subordinate to the boss.

Delegating responsibility is not **abdicating responsibility**. Delegation does not allow you to reduce your overwhelming workload by giving someone else the problem so that you can forget about it. **Those things that you are responsible for before delegating you are still responsible for after delegating.**

Delegating authority is not **abdicating authority**. Authority is not absolute – there are different levels of authority that can be delegated. Giving an employee too much or too little authority will not produce the optimal results. The challenge is to ensure that your employee feels that he or she is being given tasks that are stretching, but achievable.

Six Levels of Authority:

- Look into the problem; report all facts to me; I will decide what to do.
- Look into the problem; let me know alternative actions including pros and cons of each; and recommend one for my approval.
- Look into the problem; let me know what you propose to do; don't take action until I approve.
- Look into the problem; let me know what you propose to do; do it unless I say 'No'.
- Take action; let me know what you did.
- Take action; no further contact with me is required.

Follow-up and control procedures can be based on critical events, milestones, or regular time periods.

To Hold Subordinates Accountable:

1. Measure how well they have achieved the desired results.

2. Evaluate how well they have stayed within the boundaries of their delegated authority.

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What Do You Propose?

Every person wants their own ideas to be sought after and respected. You are more motivated by your own ideas than by someone else's – so are your employees.

By continually asking 'What do you propose?', you create a climate of self-reliance where every person is encouraged to assume responsibility; to think for themselves and come up with their own ideas and solutions.

What's in it for your people:

- They gain **confidence** from your trust and encouragement.
- They're **motivated** because they are able to assume responsibility.
- They're able to use their own **creativity and initiative**.
- They in turn are **encouraged** to ask their people for ideas.

What's in it for you:

- You build a team of **confident, self-reliant individuals**.
- You receive **ideas** that you would not have thought of yourself.
- It shows you have **respect** for their ideas and contribution.
- You are more **secure** when your people are motivated, confident, and responsible.

The one most important and essential condition:

That you **listen to** and **use** your people's ideas. That is, you schedule times to follow-up their suggestions and proposals; and you delegate authority so that they're empowered to act.

An anecdote:

> A Managing Director that I was coaching was very struck by this idea. The next day, he put a sign up on his office door with the words "What do <u>you</u> propose?" on it. Around 10.00am, he noticed the door handle to his office turn, yet the door didn't open. Instead, it stayed there for a few seconds as the employee read and absorbed the sign on the door. Slowly, silently, the door handle returned to its usual position without the door being opened. The MD was perplexed.

About forty-five minutes later, there was a confident knock on the door, and an employee walked in. He described a problem that had cropped up, the options he had considered and outlined his proposal for what they should do. It took about five minutes. All the manager had to do was say, “Sounds great – go for it”. The employee left, feeling good about how the meeting had gone and motivated to achieve the task.

Yet until that point this MD would have sat down with the employee, worked through the problem and ended up saying, “Leave it with me - I’ll sort it out”. He was shocked by the realization of how much of his time he spent solving problems when his employees were quite capable of solving these problems themselves. Put simply, his direct reports had been delegating problems up to him.

“The four most important words in business are: ‘What do you think?”
Jeffrey Immelt, Chairman and Chief Executive, General Electric

The Delegation Meeting

The objective of the delegation meeting is that your 'knowledge worker' leaves the meeting motivated by and committed to the goal – to engage them with the task.

Your subordinate will be more motivated by his or her own ideas than by yours and will be empowered if you delegate full authority (if this is appropriate in the specific context).

Every corporate strategy, objective and task needs to be understood and accepted by the knowledge workers who will implement it.

Delegation Guidelines:

- Come straight to the point: explain the task (a concrete objective) directly and succinctly and explain where it falls within the corporate strategy.

- Agree on the performance standards required to fulfil the task – what does success look like?

- Agree on the level of decision-making authority that the task requires.

- Tell him or her why they were selected for the task (e.g., special skills, abilities, experience, best person for the job etc.).

- Emphasize your full support in helping them achieve the objective. Encourage them to use their own experience and judgement in suggesting ways of most effectively achieving the objective.

- Get their commitment to the objective (a closed question). Without this step, you have not 'signed' the role contract with your direct report.

- Ask him or her "what do you propose"?

- Ask for their concrete next step. This gives you the opportunity to give them encouragement if they are on track, or to coach them if their suggestion is inappropriate (e.g., "How might that affect our clients?")

- Set the next meeting in the diary. This demonstrates that you are going to be following up on this conversation. Many employees have learnt that if they say 'yes' then do nothing, their manager will soon forget the conversation and move on to a new theme. Such 'flavor-of-the-month' management can be an unconscious means for both managers and employees to avoid taking responsibility for the adaptive challenges facing the organization.

Positive Reinforcement

If you are not getting the results you want, it's probably because you were not clear in your delegation in the first place.

Each time you meet with your team member, find a positive achievement to praise – praise builds your team member's self-confidence to overcome obstacles.

After you have delegated clear and concrete objectives, asked 'What do you propose?' and your team member is busy implementing their own proposals, your next important step in delegation is to check up to praise their efforts and/or results.

Some managers develop a habit of checking up to criticize or, wanting to avoid demotivating their employee, not checking up at all. Some managers think their job is to catch their employee doing something wrong.

Bear in mind that as a manager, you have attained your position because of your own high standards. People with high standards have a natural tendency to criticize and reject anything that does not conform to their own criteria. It is important that you restrain this natural tendency here.

If you have delegated properly in the first place, and there is still a problem, your team member will be **painfully** aware that his or her proposal or performance is falling short.

Your job as their manager is to identify something they have done which is a positive achievement and worthy of praise. Your purpose is to convey your own confidence in their abilities to succeed despite any setbacks they may encounter.

Checking up to praise should not be mistaken for looking over their shoulder: you are there as a coach to encourage them when things are going well, and especially when they are not. If an employee has made a mistake that affects the performance of the manager, there can be a tendency to want to punish the employee, 'Do you know how much trouble you have caused me?' Whilst this can, in the short term, be somewhat satisfying, such behavior will have a lasting, negative impact on the specific employee, but also on other employees who hear about it.

Being a Good Boss

If you ask almost any manager to think back over their career and describe the best boss they ever had, they will invariably say the following:

> 'My boss believed in me and gave me a challenging task that I didn't think I could achieve. My boss was available when I needed him or her, giving advice, coaching, feedback, and support when I needed it. But, most importantly, my boss trusted me and gave me the space necessary to allow me to learn and develop my abilities.'

How many of your direct reports would describe you in this way?

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When You Are on the Receiving End

You are responsible for producing results – even when those results have not been clearly specified. If someone is unclear – help them to be clear.

Remember that your boss is under intense pressure to get things done and that it's impossible for him/her to keep track of every detail. Expecting your boss to be perfect is both irrational and undiplomatic.

When your boss delegates to you, bear in mind that you are one of many people that they will be speaking to that day. You can therefore expect that your boss will probably forget one or more of the following:

1. Forget to tell you something important.
2. Forget to specify exactly **what results** are required.
3. Forget to specify exactly **when** the results are required.
4. Forget to specify what level of authority you can exercise, i.e., how much money you can spend and what decisions you can make without telling him/her.

Therefore, to avoid unnecessary frustration, it's useful for you to clarify six points with your manager at the first delegation meeting.

In front of your boss, write down on paper the answers to the following six questions:

1. What **specific results** are expected?
2. **When** are the results expected?
3. What **decisions** am I authorized to make on my own?
4. What **money** am I authorized to spend on my own?
5. What **facilities and/or support staff** do I have access to?
6. Is there **anything else** I need to know to get this done as effectively as possible?

If you consistently display both your willingness to assume responsibility and your ability to make things happen, you will be surprised at how rapidly resources, promotions and opportunities flow to you.

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How to Manage the Boss

By Peter F Drucker (1986)

'Most managers, including of course most chief executives, have a boss. Few people are as important to the performance and success of a manager as the boss. Yet while management books and courses abound in advice on how to manage subordinates, few if any even mention managing the boss.

Few managers seem to realize how important it is to manage the boss or, worse, believe that it can be done at all. They bellyache about the boss but do not even try to manage him (or her). Yet managing the boss is fairly simple – indeed generally quite a bit simpler than managing subordinates. There are only a few Dos, and even fewer Don'ts.

- The first do is to realize that it is both the subordinate's duty and in the subordinate's self-interest to make the boss as effective and as achieving as possible. The best prescription for one's own success is, after all, still to work for a boss who is going places. Thus, the first do is to go to the boss – at least once a year – and ask: "What do I do and what do my people do that helps you do your job? And what do we do that hampers you and makes life more difficult for you?".

The Correct Definition

This sounds obvious - but it is rarely done. For even effective executives tend to misdefine a 'manager' as someone who is responsible for the work of subordinates- the definition of 50 years ago – and thus tend not to perceive that they have any responsibility for the boss's performance and effectiveness. But the correct definition of a manager – as we have known it for at least 40 years – is someone who is responsible for the performance of all the people on whom his own performance depends.

The first person on whom a manager's performance depends is the boss, and the boss is thus the first person whose performance a manager has to take responsibility. But only by asking, 'what do I do to help you or to hamper you?'- the best way to ask is without beating about the bush – can you find out what the boss needs and what gets in the boss's way.

- Closely related is the need for awareness that your boss is a human being and an individual; no two persons work alike, perform alike, or behave alike. The subordinate's job is not to reform the boss, not to re-educate the boss, not to make the boss conform to what the business schools and the management books say bosses should be like. It is to enable a particular boss to perform as a unique individual. And being an individual, every boss has idiosyncrasies, has 'good words' and 'bad words', and, like the rest of us, needs his own security blanket.

To manage the boss requires thinking through such questions as: Does this individual who is my boss want me to come in once every month – but no more often – and spend 30 minutes presenting the performance, the plans, and the problems of my department? Or does this individual want me to come in every time there is anything to report or to discuss, every time there is the slightest change, every time we make a move? Does this individual want me to send the stuff in as a written report, in a nice folder, complete with tabs and a table of contents?

Or does this individual want an oral presentation? Is this individual, in other words, a reader or a listener? And does this boss require (as do for instance most financial executives) thirty pages of figures on everything as his security blanket – and should it be tables or graphs?

Does this individual need the information to be there when he gets to the office in the morning, or does this boss (as do a good many operating people) want it at the end of the day, say around 3:30 on Friday afternoon? And if there is a disagreement among the management group, how does this boss want to have it handled? To have us iron it out and report our consensus (as did General Eisenhower and as President Reagan clearly did)? Or for us to report our disagreements in full detail and with complete documentation (as did both Generals George Marshall and MacArthur)?

- What are the things the boss does well? What are his strengths? And what are the boss's limitations and weaknesses – the areas in which the subordinate needs to support, to buttress and to supplement the boss? A manager's task is to make the strengths of people effective and their weaknesses irrelevant – and that applies fully as much to the manager's boss as it applies to the manager's subordinates. If for instance the boss is good at marketing but uncomfortable with financial figures and analysis, managing the boss means to bring him into the marketing decision but to prepare the financial analysis beforehand and in depth.

Managing the boss means, above all, creating a relationship of trust. This requires confidence on the part of the superior that the subordinate manager will play to the boss's strengths and safeguard the boss against his or her limitations and weaknesses.

Keep the Boss Aware

- The final Do: Make sure the boss understands what can be expected of you, what the objectives and goals are on which your own energies and those of your people will be concentrated, what your priorities are, and, equally important, what they are not. It is by no means always necessary that the boss approves – it is sometimes not even desirable. But the boss must understand what you are up to, must know what to expect and what not to expect. Bosses, after all, are held responsible by their own bosses for the performance of their subordinates. They must be able to say: 'I know what Anne (or Joe) is trying to do. Only if they can say this will be able to delegate to their subordinate managers.

And now two Don'ts:

- Never expose the boss to surprises. It is the job of the subordinate to protect the boss against surprises – even pleasant ones (if any such exist). To be exposed to a surprise in the organization one is responsible for is humiliation, and usually public humiliation. Different bosses want very different warnings of possible surprises. Some – again Ike is a good example – want no more than a warning that things may turn out differently. Other bosses – President Kennedy for example – demand a full, detailed report even if there is only a slight chance of surprise. But all bosses need to be protected against surprises. Otherwise, they will not trust a subordinate – and with good reason.

- Never underrate the boss! The boss may look illiterate: he may look stupid – and looks are not always deceptive. But there is no risk at all in overrating a boss. The worst that can happen is for the boss to feel flattered. But if you underrate the boss, he will either see through your little game and will bitterly resent it. Or the boss will impute to you the deficiency in brains or knowledge you imputed to the boss and will consider you ignorant, dumb, or lacking in imagination.

But the most important thing is not what to do or what not to do. It is to accept that managing the boss is the responsibility of the subordinate manager and a key – maybe the most important one- to his or her own effectiveness as an executive.'