



The 'Secret Sauce' of Effective Delegation Bruce E. Roselle

More leaders struggle with effective delegation of tasks and responsibilities than any other single skill in their day to day work. They often hold on to more than they should, swoop in to take tasks back, or dump the tasks on others with little context or follow through. Are you one of those leaders?

In a recent coaching conversation with a senior leader, we focused on delegating more thoroughly to her team in order to more effectively manage her time. She gave me a quizzical look when I brought up 'delegation', because she had defined her coaching issue as 'time management'. I explained that, in order to manage time in a win-win-win strategy, she needed to become great at delegating work. She gave me another quizzical look. I explained that delegation is the only strategy I am aware of that creates a 'win' for her, the team members, and the organization. The three wins are these:

- Leader wins by freeing up time for higher priority tasks that are important, but not as urgent
- Team member wins by learning new skills, growing in perspective, positioning for the next level
- Organization wins by pushing decisions down to the lowest level, getting most bang for the buck

The light started to go on in her eyes now. But quickly, she began to raise questions like these:

- What if my direct report doesn't do the task well?
- What if they approach it in a way I know won't work?
- How will I keep my finger on the pulse of the work, if I give it away?
- How will my boss know the work is being done to her satisfaction?

These are examples of what I call 'faulty beliefs' about delegation, ones that are fear-based and undermine a leader's capacity to delegate fully. (See my 2006 book, *Fearless Leadership* for more on faulty beliefs and underlying fears). Most leaders have a version of them in their minds as they hesitate to delegate, not trusting the outcome. This leader added a relatively new twist, however, when she asked, "Won't my team members just think I'm being lazy and arrogant, dumping work tasks on them that I consider beneath me?"

I laughed and thought about it for a minute. Then, I suggested that she use this strategy: "*If you can't think of how a task will benefit your direct report, don't delegate it.*" This puts the emphasis on the requirement that a delegated task or responsibility must have some clear benefit to the person being handed it. She smiled now, as she recognized that this simple rule would counteract her primary faulty belief about delegation.

How about you as a leader? Do you use delegation as effectively as you could? Is your boss pressuring

you to take on other tasks and responsibilities, but your plate is too full to accommodate them? Are you grooming your replacement by making sure this person and others on your team are continually challenged to stretch in their work tasks and approaches? When you delegate, do you make your expectations clear and provide the optimal amount of support?

In another situation, this one from my first coaching conversation with the leader of a growing ministry, the issue of delegation came up again. He showed me an email he had crafted to his Executive Committee that outlined potential changes in his role. These changes were designed to free up his time, but I wasn't sure he was focusing on the highest priority items or building in enough development for his direct reports.

I asked him what he thought were the components of his executive director role that only he could or should focus on. He identified these as the key aspects of his role:

- Casting the vision and making sure it was clearly understood by staff and other constituencies
- Being the point person, with other key staff, in connecting with other organizations and individuals who could help support the programs of this ministry
- Managing his staff and helping to guide their programs
- Leading a couple of specific ministry programs that were especially dear to his heart

This was a very good start, and I encouraged him in the thinking he had done so far. However, I also asked, "What about developing people who are in key roles right now, as well as those who could be groomed to fill these roles in the future—including your own?" That stumped him for a moment, and I saw that now familiar quizzical look on this new face.

As in my first example, the identified issue was managing time and feeling too stretched to meet all the demands, and, again, the solution was to delegate more effectively. In particular, the solution was to identify the highest priority tasks that only he should handle, and to find ways to develop others on the staff to take on more of the responsibilities he currently controlled.

So, what is the 'secret sauce' of effective delegation? Here are the key ingredients:

- Determine how much support versus challenge you will provide for tasks delegated to each person on the team, based on your sense of their competence and confidence.
- Make your expectations and work direction clear on the front end as you delegate tasks; make sure they understand by asking them to tell you what their understanding is. This makes it much easier to hold people accountable downstream.
- Determine the decision-making latitude with this person on this particular task. That is, should they only take implementation steps after checking with you, make recommendations for the decisions and steps, decide and inform you before taking, or just decide and inform you later?
- Monitor progress on delegated tasks, giving feedback that encourages and provides correction as needed. Use an action plan that they create, with specific priority steps, check-in times, and due dates where needed.
- Never, ever swoop in to take tasks back in order to get them done right!

And remember that, if you are having problems with time management, first take a critical look at how effectively you are delegating to your team.