

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Delegation: Who's Left with the Accountability?

by Dr. Mike Armour

If you are a manager, there is only one reason that you have your position: *to ensure the success of one or more vital functions of the organization.*

Moreover, you are a manager because the function entrusted to you is too large for one person to fulfill alone. Otherwise you could fulfill your function as an individual contributor and would not need a team to manage.

So since the function is too large for you to fulfill alone, success depends on your ability to leverage your energy and skills. And this leverage comes in the form of skillful delegation.

The Delegation Process

Because good delegation is so vital, we should begin by defining it.

Delegation is the process by which management at any level entrusts a portion of its authority and a sub-set of its duties to a lower level of the organization.

This authority may be entrusted to an organizational unit, an individual, or a group of individuals (e.g., a task force or a work team).

Thus, delegation results in new tasking, a new set of duties for one or more parties at a lower level of the organization.

Yet, as simple and as straightforward as this idea might seem to be, there is often a debate in management circles as to what you delegate with this new set of duties. Do you delegate responsibility? Authority? Accountability?

Interestingly, even respected specialists in management theory disagree on this because there is no universal consensus as to the meaning of the terms "responsibility," "authority," and "accountability" when it comes to delegation.

What Do You Delegate?

Without going into the nuances of this debate, let me make the following observations, then offer my own view as to what you delegate.

- Duty and responsibility are so closely linked that they are all but inseparable. That is, anyone with a duty has a responsibility to fulfill it. And anyone with a responsibility has a duty to carry it out. Therefore to delegate a duty to someone is to confer on this person some type of responsibility.
- Responsibility is also closely linked with accountability, because at the heart of both responsibility and accountability is the concept of being answerable. With responsibility, however, I'm answerable *for* something, whereas in accountability I'm answerable *to* someone. Thus, we speak of being "responsible for" and "accountable to."
- As a manager, the "someone" to whom I'm accountable is the management level immediately above me. Therefore, I cannot delegate my accountability, because (1) I can only delegate to parties below me and (2) those parties are immediately answerable to me, not the management level to which I'm answerable myself.
- Does this mean that when I delegate, there is no accountability on the parties to whom I delegate? No, quite the contrary. They are accountable to me. But this is not because I have delegated my accountability to them. It is because I have created an additional layer of accountability that did not previously exist with regard to the delegated duty.
- The word "responsibility" literally means "the ability to respond." To be able to respond, however, we must have the authority to do so. Therefore, delegation must always include a transfer of at least limited authority.

And the key phrase here is "limited authority." No manager can relinquish the ultimate authority that is inherent in his or her position. Nor can managers relinquish either their accountability or their ultimate responsibility for the function(s) within their purview.

Ultimate and Immediate Responsibility

But delegation is not a relinquishing of *ultimate* responsibility. It is instead a process by which sufficient *revocable authority* is entrusted to someone to permit that person to take on the *immediate* responsibility for the delegated duty.

Once delegation occurs, the manager still retains *ultimate* responsibility for the delegated duty. But the party to whom the duty was delegated now has *immediate* responsibility for it.

This distinction between *ultimate* responsibility and *immediate* responsibility is often overlooked when discussing what can and cannot be delegated. Failure to note this distinction is a primary reason that authorities on the subject of delegation sometimes disagree on its inner workings.

Now, to the degree that any amount of responsibility is transferred through delegation, there must be a commensurate transfer of authority. How much authority? That depends on the level of accountability which is levied on the party to whom the duty was delegated.

The amount of delegated authority must be sufficient to make the level of accountability realistic.

Putting It All Together

Here, then, is a summary of the inner dynamics of delegation. As a manager ...

- You pass immediate responsibility for the delegated duty along with the duty
- You grant decision-making authority commensurate with that responsibility
- You retain accountability and ultimate responsibility for the delegated duty
- You forego credit for successful fulfillment of the duty

We can therefore amplify on our original definition of delegation with this further explanation of what delegation entails.

*Delegation is a process by which sufficient revocable authority is entrusted to someone to permit that person to take on **immediate** responsibility for the delegated duty.*

In our [next issue](#) we will lay out some proven guidelines for effective delegation.

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