

SIGMA

Leadership Series



Great Leaders Delegate



GREAT LEADERS DELEGATE

“ If you want to do a few small things right, do them yourself. If you want to do great things and make an impact, learn to delegate.

– John C. Maxwell

Leaders are often overwhelmed with many competing priorities and heavy workloads. Research suggests that not only do leaders experience greater levels of burnout than direct reports, but that a leader’s burnout and exhaustion predict their employees’ burnout¹. One of the methods leaders can use to reduce their workload and subsequently their stress is to delegate tasks to their employees. Delegation involves assigning responsibility and authority over a task to direct reports and giving them discretion in determining how to do their work. Research has shown that leaders who delegate have higher rates of effectiveness² and overall performance³.

There are many barriers to leaders delegating work to their employees. With their busy schedules, leaders often feel it is faster and less risky to complete the work themselves. Some may feel they do not have time to monitor the work of their employees. They may be unwilling to assign more work to already busy employees. Leaders may also be uncomfortable with depending on others. However, the best way to solve these issues is to begin delegating more work – over time, employees can develop new skills, leaders and direct reports alike become more comfortable with the process, and leaders can begin to trust their employees to take on more responsibility. If done well, this process can be beneficial to both parties.

In assessing your ability to delegate work to others, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I delegate tasks to my employees?
- Have I made an effort to develop the skills of my employees?
- How well do I understand which tasks should be done by myself or by others?
- Am I intentional in who I assign tasks to?
- Do I consider my expectations before delegating work to employees?
- Am I prepared to give feedback and advice to employees who are trying new tasks?

Improve Your Ability to Delegate

Understand the value: Delegating work is more than taking a task off your plate and putting it on the plate of your subordinates. It involves giving employees the appropriate freedom and responsibility to do their work. Research suggests that having work delegated to an employee can be empowering for that employee⁴ and is a signal of leader trust in their followers⁵.

Further, research finds that leaders who delegate have employees who are more satisfied in their work^{3,6}. This suggests that leaders, employees, and the overall workplace culture all stand to benefit from delegation.

Learn which tasks to delegate: Choosing which tasks to delegate can be a daunting prospect – it often feels faster and more efficient to do the work yourself than to decide who should be given which assignment. Consider implementing the “Three Buckets” approach to your work. For a full week, write down every task you do each day, regardless of how small or unimportant it may seem. At the end of the week, assign each task a number based on the following system: *1 = tasks I am doing that do not need to be done at all; 2 = tasks I am doing that could be done by someone else; 3 = tasks I am doing that can only be done by me.* Be honest with these ratings and remember that some tasks in category 3 may be good candidates for direct reports to complete once they have gained some experience and guidance. Over time, you will be able to recognize which tasks are better done by you and which tasks are better done by others.

Develop your employees: As noted, one of the significant barriers to delegating is the feeling that employees will be overwhelmed, overworked, or tested outside of their abilities. Leaders are concerned that delegating a task to an employee will slow the progress of their work and may result in sub-optimal performance. However, if a leader never delegates difficult work, employees are never given the opportunity to grow their skills. The key to getting comfortable with delegating some of your work to your subordinates is ensuring they have the skills and resources to complete the work effectively and efficiently. Begin by giving an employee a small part of an ongoing project. Don’t just ask them to complete the new task – provide clear expectations about their performance, check-in with the employee often, and ensure there is time left for providing feedback. This may begin as a slow process, but it will help your employees learn new skills and become quicker in their work in the future. Show confidence in your employees, treat failure as an opportunity to learn, and recognize that learning takes time but is often worth the investment.

Start Doing These 3 Things Now to Improve Your Delegation Skills

The following steps can help you develop your ability to delegate:

- 1. Plan your delegation carefully.** There are many things to consider when delegating a task. Who is best suited to complete the job? Do you want to assign the work to an individual or to a team? Are you assigning a full project or a specific task? Carefully consider the current skills and abilities of your employees, as well as their potential to grow in specific areas. Remember that even if none of your direct reports are currently qualified to complete a task, assigning them a small piece of it can develop their skills for future projects. While planning your delegation, also consider what criteria and requirements you have for successful performance. Be realistic in your goal setting, and expect that there will be delays, setbacks, or unpredicted difficulties. Consider your ideal outcome, and make sure you can communicate this vision to the person who is assigned the work.

2. **Monitor the performance of your direct report.** Once you have chosen an employee to delegate to, have a conversation with them about your standards and expectations. In this conversation, outline your goals and vision decided in the step above. Once you have reached a shared understanding of the task, you can work together to set realistic goals. It may be helpful to divide the tasks into smaller, more manageable components. Set deadlines for each sub-task and provide yourself extra time to review the work and provide employees with feedback. If there are any errors, give the individual a chance to fix their mistakes. This will aid their learning and provide them with a greater sense of autonomy. Keep all feedback constructive and be sure to acknowledge when a task is well done. Be careful to avoid micro-managing – you want to provide enough guidance to keep the project on track, but to allow the individual to retain control.
3. **Evaluate the lessons learned.** When a project is completed, take note of how it went. Were deadlines met? Was the project completed to satisfaction? Did the employee meet your standards? Indicate both what went well and what stumbling blocks you or the employee encountered. When considering successes, make sure to reflect on the benefits to yourself, your unit, and the employee who completed the work. If there were any issues the employee faced, make note of these for future developmental opportunities. Consider having a conversation with the employee to get a sense of their perception of the experience. Remember, learning to delegate is a skill like any other, and it may take time for you to be skilled at choosing what to delegate, when to delegate, and who to delegate to. Ask your employees for feedback on your own performance during the process and refer back to these comments in future delegation.

Resources



[Delegating Effectively](#)



[To Be a Great Leader, You Have to Learn How to Delegate](#)



Develop your ability to delegate by taking advantage of SIGMA's coaching services.

Contact SIGMA for coaching on developing your skills as a leader.

SIGMA Assessment Systems, Inc.

Email: support@SigmaHR.com

Call: 800-265-1285

References

- ¹Huang, J., Wang, Y., Wu, G., & You, X. (2016). Crossover of burnout from leaders to followers: A longitudinal study. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 25*(6), 849-861.
- ² Martell, R. F., & DeSmet, A. L. (2001). A diagnostic-ratio approach to measuring beliefs about the leadership abilities of male and female managers. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 86*(6), 1223-1231.
- ³Drescher, G. (2017). Delegation outcomes: Perceptions of leaders and follower's satisfaction. *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 32*(1), 2-15.
- ⁴Sim, D. L., Ansari, M. A., & Jantan, M. (2004). Delegation styles and leadership perceptions: A comparison of Malaysian and American managers. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management, New Orleans, LA, August 6-11, 2004.
- ⁵Yukl, G. & Fu, P. P. (1999). Determinants of delegation and consultation by managers. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour, 20*(2), 219-232.
- ⁶Leana, C. R. (1986). Predictors and consequences of delegation. *Academy of Management Journal, 29*(4), 754-774.