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CARE's WorkLife Solutions Weekly Wire

Delegating to Whittle Down Your To-Do List

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Note: In an effort to reduce the amount of emails that you receive, beginning in April, we will send monthly wires instead of weekly. We encourage you to continue to utilize our website for pertinent information.

Delegating to Whittle Down Your To-Do List

Why delegate?

So your boss has just asked you to evaluate whether the company needs a new sales office in the southern region. You're flattered by her vote of confidence. Trouble is, you were about to start planning the budget for the next quarter. Now there's too much on your plate and not enough hours in a day. Something's got to give, and you're afraid it might be your stomach lining. Don't reach for the antacids. Instead, reach for one of a good manager's most important tools: delegation.

Delegating means assigning a person to do a task for which you'll be ultimately responsible. That means you'll want the job done well. The trick is to choose the best person and then give your delegate the right mix of freedom, authority and supervision to ensure the finished job meets your standards.

No manager can succeed without delegating. You'll always have more responsibilities than you personally can carry out. Effective delegating will streamline your workload so you can focus on the most important things. It will boost the experience, confidence, and enthusiasm of your staff. (Delegating works outside the office, too. Who knows—you may succeed in delegating to your kids the chores of mowing the lawn or taking out the trash.)

Steps of Skillful Delegating

1. First, set priorities for your tasks, identifying responsibilities you should delegate and responsibilities that must remain under your control.
2. Pick the right delegates. Ask yourself: "Who can handle the job?" "Who will benefit most in growth and development by taking on added responsibilities?" "Who deserves a reward for a previous job well-done?"
3. Communicate the task clearly to your delegate. You can't hold people responsible for failing to carry out a vague assignment.
4. Finally, decide how much freedom you can give to your delegates and still keep a comfortable level of control. Give them enough freedom to suit their working style. Give them enough decision-making authority to get the job done. But monitor the project with regular progress reports. Remember that you're ultimately responsible. Balancing autonomy and control can be tricky, but it gets easier each time.

Key Tips

Don't expect delegating to come naturally.

Working by remote control is difficult, especially when we think we can do the job better or faster ourselves. Also, be prepared to delegate some work that you enjoy. The tasks only you can do may not be the most fun ones, so delegation often means letting go of enjoyable tasks. Just remember that even though delegating may seem somewhat stressful at first, you'll soon find it wonderfully liberating.

It pays to start out small.

The first time you take the plunge; don't delegate preparing your department's annual expense budget (no matter how much you hate doing it). Design a discrete task that shouldn't take too long and that won't spell disaster if things don't go quite as expected.

Focus on results, not methods.

You're delegating, remember? So stay calm if your employee formats documents differently, or prepares his plan in an unfamiliar way. Remind yourself that the results are the most important aspect of a project.

Resist *reverse delegation*.

Reverse delegation is when an employee tries to shift responsibility back to you for the delegated task. The delegate may say, "I ran into a problem here. What should I do?" Coming to the rescue would defeat the purpose of delegating. Gently tell the delegate that finding solutions is part of the task.

Specifics

Selecting the Best Delegate

If you've surrounded yourself with good people, selecting a delegate should be easy. Match the person's interests, experience, and skills to the task. Make sure the person understands why you're delegating the task. Some delegated work is bound to be boring or trivial. Be honest about it. But never overload good employees with dirty work. If they know you'll also reward them with valuable assignments that advance their careers, they'll willingly accept their share of menial jobs. The best incentive for accepting added responsibility is the chance to learn new skills and prove oneself.

Managing the Assignment

You can fail your delegate just as he or she can fail you. Live up to your end of the deal by giving your delegate the basics for success.

- Make your expectations clear and provide a model of the results you expect that your delegate can use as a guide.
- Make sure your delegate has the time, resources, and authority to do the job.
- Clearly delineate the limits of your delegate's authority.
- Explain the nature of any problems that must be referred to you.
- Let your delegate know what you require in terms of reporting, how frequently you plan to touch base, and by what means (e-mail, telephone, face-to-face meetings, etc.).
- Reassure your delegate that your door is always open for questions or brainstorming.
- Don't micromanage! This is the opposite of delegating. You may learn something by watching a talented subordinate do things another way.

Sharing the Success

When delegated tasks are successfully completed, both you and your delegate look great. Always—*always*—sing the praises of employees who complete assignments successfully. Don't just tell them how well they've done, tell their peers, senior management, anyone you can find. You may be grooming your successor so that you both can move on to better things.

FAQs

My employees seem reluctant to take on assignments that I want to delegate. How can I make them more open to accepting additional responsibilities?

Employees can be overwhelmed by the idea of taking on added tasks and responsibilities. You'll achieve best results if employees understand why it's in their best interests to take the new responsibilities. Point out to your employees that delegation gives them a chance to learn new skills and increase their job satisfaction through a variety of successes. It also enhances their career potential. Once employees understand this, you can delegate new responsibilities as a reward for past performance.

Increase your delegate's chance of success by providing clear objectives and regularly monitoring progress. If, however, a particular employee seems very reluctant, it may be better to find someone else for the job. As P.T. Barnum is reputed to have said, "If people really don't want to do something, there's nothing you can do to stop 'em."

Things are not going well with an assignment I delegated. I'm afraid I made a mistake. What should I do?

Pulling back on the reins can be tricky. Review the assignment with your employee again to make sure he or she truly understands the goals. Ask about the problems and discuss possible solutions. Make sure your employee has enough resources and authority to get the job done. Be flexible about deadlines, if possible. Take the assignment back only as a last resort.

I'm comfortable delegating, but my boss has a terrible problem with it. I feel like I'm stagnating. What can I do about it?

Try proposing specific things you could do that would make his or her life easier, such as "I've seen that statistical analysis sitting in your inbox now for the past two weeks. I'd be happy to take that off your hands, if you'd like." Make sure your boss understands that you look upon your relationship as a partnership.

I get butterflies whenever I think about giving someone a role in decision making. Any suggestions?

These things can ease your queasiness:

Start small. Choose a manageable task with a reasonably achievable deadline.

Set interim goals and deadlines. This will help you keep abreast of your employee's progress, and give your employee several opportunities for feedback.

If you're really nervous, create a false deadline. Tell your delegate that the project is due a week earlier than you actually need it. It's known as giving yourself "wiggle room," and it might come in handy for both of you.

Set clear, definable limits. For example, you can tell your delegate: "Don't spend more than the limit we agreed upon without talking to me" or "I want to see a dry run of your presentation before we go to the board with it." Once you trust an employee's decision-making skills, you can adjust his limits accordingly.

Workplace Options. (Updated 2008, June 2). Delegating to whittle down your to-do list. Raleigh, NC: Author