

3 tips for delegating more effectively



Written by

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[Management](#)

Key topics

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Create more time to focus on the things that matter - practical tips for managers

You feel frustrated because important projects are progressing too slowly; your manager says you need to be more strategic, but you barely have time for lunch, let alone strategy.

If this predicament sounds familiar, you may need more staff. Or your job description may be impossibly broad.

Or, though you may not like to admit it, you could be spending too much time on tasks that could be done by others.

Difficulty delegating is a common issue raised by managers on our development programmes. The good news is that you can get better at it.

1. Recognise the problem

First, you need to recognise you have a problem with delegation. Perhaps you find you are working late on a consistent basis, or you miss deadlines, or are much busier than your direct reports. Your colleagues may have dropped hints – you may have been told you “take on a lot”, for example.

2. Identify what is preventing effective delegation

Understand how your actions and feelings may be hindering effective delegation. Some common examples:

- **Protecting your reports:** You shield your staff from work that is boring or repetitive and instead do it yourself. This may be because you want to be liked by your reports and are worried about how they will react to being given such work.
- **Perfectionism:** You may choose not to delegate as you are convinced you will do the best job. This may well be true, but certain tasks may not be a good use of your time. Or perhaps you had a bad experience in the past so think it is safer not to engage others.
- **Wanting to be the expert:** You may feel your knowledge adds a lot of value to your organisation and you want to demonstrate it at every opportunity.

However, this can mean you fail to engage and develop others. This can be particularly common in managers who have been promoted from positions as functional experts into roles requiring team leadership.

- **Anxiety:** You may be hording tasks because you are anxious or insecure. Perhaps you are uncertain about your own priorities so you do a bit of everything in the hope that something will please your manager. Or perhaps you feel the need to justify your senior position by appearing busier than others.

3. Develop techniques to help you delegate

There are practical techniques to help you delegate. We dedicate a whole session to delegation on our leadership development programme for executives and focus on encouraging our participants to tailor solutions to their own strengths and weaknesses.

A good starting point is to define an effective structure for “delegation conversations”. Delegation conversations are the times at work when you attempt to delegate work to someone else. Here’s a structure to use as a starting point:

- **Understand your audience - who is being assigned the task?** Consider the skills, confidence and experience of the staff member who is being given a piece of work. How much information and support will they need? Is what is being asked of them achievable?
- **Frame the request:** Clearly express to the staff member why this piece of work is necessary and why they are being asked to do it. What is the background to the piece of work? Why is it important? How does it fit into the bigger picture? Why are they the person who is best placed to do this task?
- **Define success:** Clearly define what outcomes you are looking for and make sure the person you are delegating to has a clear idea of practicalities like deadlines and approvals required.
- **Arrange follow-up:** How often would you like updates on the piece of work and in what form?

This structure is simple, but it is surprising how often important issues are left unsaid or ill-defined in delegation conversations, causing frustration and inefficiency.

Even seasoned managers can struggle to delegate effectively. Coaching can help you to improve your delegation skills and free up time to focus on the things that matter.

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Nelson Phillips was Professor of Innovation & Strategy, Co-Director of the Centre for Responsible Leadership, and the Associate Dean of External Relations at Imperial College Business School until 2021. His research interests cut across strategy, innovation and leadership, and he has published widely for both academics and practitioners.