

Managing People

How to Stop Delegating and Start Teaching

by Art Markman

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Summary. As a manager, a central part of your job is to develop people. But when you delegate a task to someone — with no prior training — simply because you are unavailable to do it, their chances of succeeding are slim. Managers need to stop thinking of passing off responsibilities as delegating,... [more](#)

As a college professor, I regularly train PhD students. In psychology and most fields of science, students are assigned to a project early on in their studies and learn key skills through an apprenticeship model. Many go on to projects related to more specific research goals, and are eventually taught to design their own studies — a slow and painstaking process. Each step, from idea development and design to data analysis and reporting, requires a lot of supervision. It would generally be faster for lab directors to hire employees to carry out these studies instead, or to do all the heavy lifting themselves.

But, then, who would train the next generation of scientists?

Managers who have difficulty delegating tasks can learn from this process — particularly if your workload has become overwhelming, or you need someone to pick up the slack when you are out of town. The hardest part about delegating a task to someone else is trusting that they will do it well. And many managers are reluctant to turn over their responsibilities to someone who may not meet that expectation.

But there is a problem with this mindset. Managers need to stop thinking of passing off responsibilities as delegating — period. If you do, then you will only assign your employees high-level tasks when you don't have time to do them. Until then, you will continue doing everything yourself. This is not an uncommon behavior. After all, you are probably better at doing your job than your direct reports, who have less experience in your role.

The problem with this style of delegation is that it sets your employees up for failure. A coach wouldn't let an athlete go into a big game without practicing extensively beforehand. Managers should share this same mentality. When you assign someone a task for the first time — with no prior training — simply because you are

unavailable to do it, their chances of succeeding are slim. You also run the risk of damaging team morale. Employees might get the impression that they are not capable of doing complex work if they are too overwhelmed by the task.

As a manager, a central part of your job is to train and develop people. This includes people who want to move into leadership roles, similar to yours, one day. When you take on the mindset of a trainer — instead of a manager delegating work — you will naturally look for ways to give a little more responsibility to the people who work for you. And those people who put in effort, and show an aptitude for the work, should be given more opportunities to try new, challenging tasks.

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To start, try to gauge who on your team genuinely wants to move up in the organization, and identify their main areas of interest. Create a development plan for them and write down the skills they will need in order to reach their goals. Then, focus on giving them assignments that require those skills, as well as any tasks you think they are curious to explore. Often, people need a nudge to focus on their weaknesses — particularly ones that they are convinced fall out of their wheelhouse.

Structure the experience so that your employees are able to work their way up to a challenging task. Give them a series of practice sessions. The first time you introduce a task to someone, you might want them to experience it as a ride-along. Just let them shadow you while you explain some of the key points. Then, give them a piece to do on their own with your supervision. Only let them carry the full load when you sense that they are ready.

For example, you might want to teach someone how to run a weekly progress meeting while you are out. Start by training them when you are in the office. Have them watch you formulate the agenda and think through the issues that will be discussed. Then, the next time, let them create an agenda of their own, but critique it. Give them a chance to run part of the meeting with your supervision. That way, they are ready to run a full meeting on their own when the time comes. By doing this, you are both helping your team reach their career goals, and training them to take on some of your own responsibilities.

Taking on some of your direct reports as apprentices is an effort. It will take extra time out of your already busy week. You will have to check their work carefully at first to make sure that it is up to your standards. You will have to teach them not only how to do the tasks, but also, why the tasks are done that way. You will have to call on them to help fix any problems that arise from the work they've done, because practice is how they will learn. And your own productivity may slow down as a result of the time you spend mentoring others.

When you make this kind of training a regular part of your job, though, delegating tasks becomes easy. You will have created a team of trusted associates who can step in and help when you are

overwhelmed or out of the office. And, as an added bonus, you have also groomed your successors. After all, as the old saying goes, if you can't be replaced, you can't be promoted.

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