

Jeff Oltmann on Mastering Projects  
**Six Steps to Better Delegation**

### Delegation Dilemma

John is the chief executive at one of my clients. He is visionary, smart, and articulate, but he doesn't delegate well. He gives vague directions to his teams, believing that he is empowering his people by giving plenty of freedom. When the results aren't what he wants, he swoops in to micro-manage. Team members feel whipsawed and confused, while John is frustrated at their slow progress toward realizing the vision that he sees so clearly.

### Your Sanity is at Stake

Bad delegation like John's is rampant in project organizations. Even if you are not the chief executive, delegation is a crucial project leadership skill for your career.

- Good delegation is in your self-interest, because you can't do everything personally. You don't have enough time and energy to directly manage everything on the projects you lead. To save your own health and sanity, you must give your teams autonomy.
- Good delegation allows teams to self-manage and be more productive. Micromanagement decreases motivation, while self-management increases motivation. Both Frederick Herzberg<sup>1</sup> and Peter Drucker<sup>2</sup> have written extensively about this.

Delegating responsibility is difficult for many project and program managers, especially those who were recently individual contributors. As individual contributors, their successes were partly

due to their attention to detail and how well they did the work themselves. When they become project leaders, their success depends on coordinating and leveraging the work of others instead.

### Six Steps to Success

Figure 1 shows the six steps of good delegation, and how both parties must participate actively, passing the lead from one to the other at different times.

I'll describe the steps as if you, as the

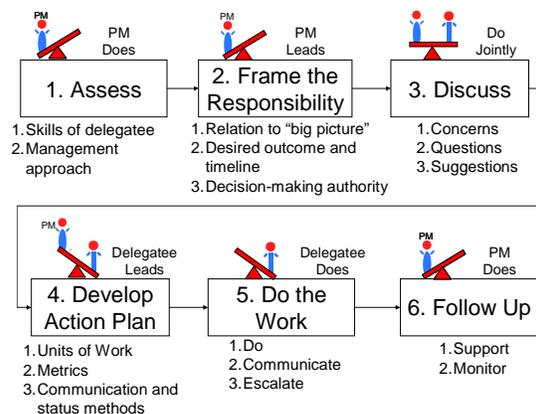


Figure 1: Delegation Steps

project manager, are delegating a responsibility to a delegatee.

**1 Assess** the skills of the delegatee. Different people can handle different levels of autonomy, so tune your approach to the appropriate level.

**2 Frame** the responsibility that you plan to delegate. Clearly describe the responsibilities you're delegating, the results that you expect, and how much authority you are transferring.

**3 Discuss** the delegation with the person to whom you are delegating. Ask for suggestions and concerns, then respond to them.

**4 Develop** a plan of action. Agree on how the delegated responsibilities will be carried out and how progress will be communicated. The delegatee should take the lead on this step according to his experience and skill.

**5 Implement** the plan. The delegatee does the delegated work, communicating and escalating to you as agreed.

**6 Support**, monitor, and follow up. You must monitor progress and provide enough support for the delegatee to succeed.

These six steps avoid common delegation problems:

- **Too much involvement.** The delegator stays too involved and doesn't let go of the delegated responsibilities. This happens so often that it has earned a special name – micro-managing.

- **Not enough involvement.** The delegator is too distant, often framing the delegated responsibilities in in fuzzy terms, then following up only sporadically.

Both of these problems lead to frustration and poor results, as well as lack of ownership and poor commitment on the part of the delegatee.

## Adapt Your Delegation Style

Ken Blanchard points out that different team members are at different levels of development in their “followership” skills. He suggests that a leader tune his level of directive and supportive behavior to suit the development level of the person he is leading.<sup>3</sup> Figure 2 shows Blanchard's levels of development and the corresponding leadership behaviors.

Tuning is a good delegation technique, too. As the delegatee's skills grow, alter

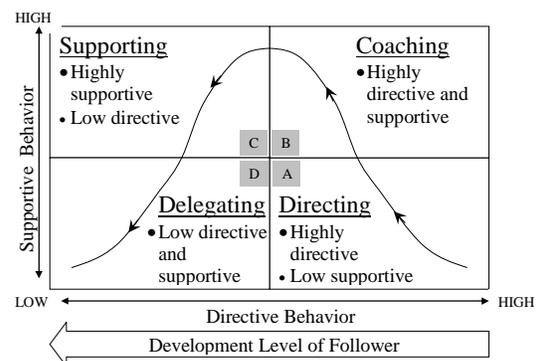


Figure 2: Leadership Behaviors vs. Follower Development

your delegation style according to sequence shown by the arrows in figure 2.

**Beginning level** (quadrant A): At this level, the delegatee needs detailed and clear direction, so focus primarily on directing (giving orders).

**Intermediate levels** (quadrants B and C): The delegatee is able to do more on his own, so progressively reduce detailed direction and increase support.

**Highest level** (quadrant D): The delegatee exhibits good judgment and can successfully manage assignments

of ambiguous scope. Delegate broad responsibilities with minimal direction and monitoring.

Done well, this delegation sequence helps followers accept progressively more responsibility and grow to become leaders themselves.

As you move up the sequence, you must accept that increased autonomy allows the delegatee to do things differently than you would, and even fail occasionally. As James T. Brown says, "Building strong teams and strong personnel means the program manager has to accept the occasional failure."<sup>4</sup>

## Endpoint

Good delegation increases the productivity and morale of your teams, extends your leverage as a leader, and may even save your sanity. Few of us naturally excel at the six steps of good

delegation. Nevertheless, the results of good delegation are worth the hard practice that is needed to master it.

## References

You can download a delegation planning worksheet from the resources section of [www.spspro.com](http://www.spspro.com). More *Mastering Projects* articles are at [http://www.spspro.com/SPS\\_cases\\_papers.htm](http://www.spspro.com/SPS_cases_papers.htm)

1. Frederick Herzberg, "One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees?", Harvard Business Review, January 2003 (R0301F, reprint of 1968 article)
2. Peter Drucker, *The Essential Drucker*, "Management's New Paradigms", p. 80
3. *Situational Leadership II*, Ken Blanchard, Blanchard Training and Development, 1985
4. *The Handbook of Program Management*, James T. Brown, McGraw Hill, 2008, p. 149

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## About the Author

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