

Don't Do It—Delegate

As leaders take on greater responsibilities, off-loading certain tasks is critical. But controlling the delegation is key. **BY SARAH LEVITT**

Most of my C-suite clients need to delegate more. It's almost always what we work on together because many are preparing for an elevated leadership role or they've just landed in one.

But delegation is a crucial skill that allows anyone to use their talents more effectively. For most of my clients in leadership positions, delegation is critical because they need to get out of the weeds. To use another metaphor, they can't be on the front lines fighting fires. It's one thing to realize they need to do this but extracting themselves can be challenging.

That's because fighting fires, being a reliable first responder, is often what gets someone noticed. It's where they earn their stripes. And, most often, they're really, really good at it.

But I would suggest that mere delegation isn't the answer. Controlled delegation, however, is. And there's a difference.

What does controlled delegation look like? It doesn't mean getting things off your plate in one fell swoop or even immediately. It means considering the following:

What are the tasks where you are no longer needed but which you are still doing – the non-essentials? Perhaps you're still attending meetings where a proxy could serve in your place and report back to you. Or maybe you're reviewing reports where a deputy could do so just as effectively.

Where are the greatest time wasters – the tasks that are non-critical to your role? And, are you doing old work out of habit rather than adding value? Have you had a conversation with your boss about where you add the greatest value?

Once you've identified even two or three key tasks or responsibilities that might be delegated, the next question is to whom? What staff member can take these on immediately, or over time with support? What kind of time frame is needed? Three months? Six? A year? Would the person being delegated to actually want the additional responsibility?

Next, establish the guardrails and guidelines that you need to put in place. Create mile markers, the check-ins, that will allow you to keep an eye on things at significant junctures and be sure that the train is staying on the tracks. Perhaps the person that you're delegating responsibilities to can shadow you, learning firsthand as they assume the new tasks.

It's crucial that these guidelines are established so that both parties feel comfortable. And it's your job, as the delegator, to have an open-door policy for questions.

Next, consider the red flags that you want to establish. What situations might arise that you need to be informed of immediately? One of my clients wanted a two-month lead time to be notified if a project was not going to meet its anticipated deadline, for example. Time and money are often crucial factors to monitor.

During the initial phase of delegation, when you're spending time getting someone up to speed, it can be easy to fall into the trap of "I'll just do it myself." Resist.

There are three other things that get in the way of delegating with success that I consistently see:

- The first is the automatic yes. Someone approaches you with a project or initiative, and you say "yes" because you always have. You take something on before considering if it fits into your strategic priorities.

- You haven't really identified your key strategic priorities and where you add the greatest value – where your time, attention and focus are most needed.

- You continue to do what you're good at and have been rewarded for in the past because it's familiar and comfortable, and you like it. I tell clients all the time

to keep as much of what they like but to rid themselves of the administrative work and oversight. You want to be sure to stay in front of key clients? Great. Off load the non-essentials for that account and be available to support the client relationship.

As critical as delegation is to success, it's not the answer by itself. Turning work over to someone without an adequate process in place only results in frustration. And it's likely to reinforce the idea that you should hold on tighter. But when both parties have invested, where there are guidelines in place and a safety net for questions and hurdles, there's a much greater chance for success.

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