

DELEGATION

For Delegation to Work, It Has to Come with Coaching

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Senior leaders want to believe that delegating a task is as easy as flipping a switch. Simply provide clear instructions and you are instantly relieved of responsibility, giving you more time in your schedule.

That's the dream. In reality, we all know it almost never works that way. You're often forced to step in at the last minute to save a botched deliverable. And because you jumped in to save the day, employees don't have the opportunity to learn. They aren't left to grapple with the consequences of their actions, and therefore are deprived of the chance to

discover creative solutions. What's more, morale takes a hit – employees begin to believe that no matter what they do, their work isn't good enough.

Consider the example of Jay, the CEO of a multimillion-dollar organization. A key part of Jay's role is networking with customers and partners. Jay sends out letters to his external constituents several times a year. Given his busy schedule, Jay delegates writing the letters to Steven, his vice president of communications. Steven sends Jay the letters for final review, at which point Jay sends back a version that's red-lined with many changes. Jay hopes Steven will learn from his edits and improve the next letter. Instead, the amount of red remains the same each time. In the end Jay has to write most of the letters himself. Jay fumes because he has to give up his weekend to pull things together at the last minute. Steven complains that no matter what he creates, Jay won't like it. The process takes time and leaves both of them frustrated.

As an executive coach, I've heard many stories like Jay's at dozens of Fortune 100 companies, where leaders complain about the pitfalls of delegation and the frustrating cycle when they don't get the results they want. But simply handing off a task will not yield a great outcome, no matter how clear your initial instructions. Getting someone to take on a new task requires analysis, feedback, and incremental adjustments. It may seem counterintuitive to put in extra time coaching someone through a task you didn't have time for in the first place, but the investment in fostering true delegation pays off in more-capable employees and saved time.

Using commonly known research on learning and the Hierarchy of Competence, I developed the "Delegation Dial" to help you evaluate employee skills and guide tasks while still empowering the employee to be responsible for the final deliverable. It involves two steps. First, assess how much your employee already knows about a

given task or project. Ask a few direct questions: “What is your level of comfort with this task? What approach you would take to handle this assignment? Are there particular steps you’re uncertain about?”

Then delegate based on your employee’s competence level. Here’s how the dial applies, depending on your employee’s expertise:

- **Do.** If your employee lacks experience with the organization or task and hasn’t developed the skills required for the job, she is likely what the Hierarchy of Competence calls “unconsciously incompetent.” In this instance, show her how it’s done: You do the work the first time while your employee shadows you to learn for next time.
- **Tell.** If your employee recognizes that she does not know how to execute a task to get a favorable outcome, she may be “consciously incompetent.” You can speed her progress toward mastery by encouraging self-reflection. This can help her synthesize learnings in a way that’s meaningful to her.
- **Teach.** If your employee knows some of the steps needed for a given task but struggles with others (placing her between consciously incompetent and the next stage, “consciously competent”), emphasize *why*. Show her how to perform a task by clearly explaining why you’re doing things a certain way. Calling out the individual steps reveals the underlying structure of how you approach a task.
- **Ask.** If your employee knows how to execute a task but has to follow a recipe rather than doing it automatically, she is consciously competent. To further increase her grasp of the topic, ask her what she has learned. A few specific questions, such as, “What is a key insight from this process that can you carry forward?” may allow her to realize she knows more than she thought.
- **Support.** Even if your employee is fully capable of handling the task — “unconsciously competent” — that doesn’t mean you can leave her without guidance. Schedules change, stakeholders create new priorities, and wrinkles develop. Let her know you’re available to support her as needed.

With these steps in mind, let's return to the example of Jay. After months of performing the same routine and expecting a different result, Jay brought up the situation during one of our coaching sessions. Jay and I identified where Steven might be in his learning stage of letter writing. According to Jay, Steven knew he was making mistakes but didn't know how to fix them. Jay was in the "do" mode on the Delegation Dial, which didn't match where Steven was in his learning. Instead of helping Steven learn, Jay took over the task and then fumed that he had to do the work himself.

I suggested that Jay do two things: First, start the letter-writing process earlier, considering the learning curve involved. Second, instead of red-lining the document with edits, use comments to note where the text was falling short and explain why. This placed Jay in "teach" mode. It took four or five iterations, but eventually Steven was doing all the actual letter writing. Over the next year Steven learned to write letters that met Jay's expectations.

The allure of delegation is tempting, especially considering how much time it can free up. But the tasks you delegate don't always come out finished and perfected. Delegation is a shared task. Assess the stage of learning your employee is in and split the load. It may take more time at the start, but you will get better results in the long term.



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