

Delegation – the key to succession

Dennis Sleigh

Whatever we might think about delegating – and our views may depend on our current status – how many leaders see it as basic to every succession planning? My own views have certainly altered in recent years, after too many years of feeling guilty whenever I passed a task to someone else. My earlier views variously included the idea that as a non-teaching principal it was unfair for me to delegate tasks to already over-loaded subordinates; that delegating usually meant a job had to be done twice, the second time by me; and that if I delegated work, the delegate's performance might outshine mine and make me look bad.

Realistically, delegation is an essential part of the operation of any organisation, because if the bosses do everything it suggests they never take on new ideas, new projects, new developments. If they keep doing the things that brought them to their present state, they quite possibly gain praise for the efficiency with which they perform, but where is the growth in that?

Of course, while different people have varied views on delegation, there are some things that are constant. Most of us know that it is hard work; we can easily see that it is risky; the complexity and importance of the project may determine whether we delegate it; and when we delegate we must still accept responsibility. Let's look at these before discussing other features of this concept.

Delegation is hard work

If I am too busy to do an urgent task, it makes sense that I will delegate this task to someone else. However, to do this properly, I must still devote time to the process, and that means increasing my own workload. Unless I am

so insensitive that I would simply dump the new task on someone else's desk and say "Here, deal with this – it's urgent." there are some important things for me to do first.

I have to examine the task and see whether it is the sort of work that can be delegated. If it involves access to a lot of data that others are not privy to, or if it involves continuous activity that would be impossible for a person with even a part-time teaching load to engage in it, I may have to take on the job myself. If the performance requires a presentation of the finished product to stakeholders and the person I have in mind is too timid to fulfil this role, again I cannot proceed. In other words, I must make sure that the task is in fact delegable, and that the person I have in mind is a suitable delegate.

Another burden involved in delegation is taking time to consider the potential field of delegates. If I consider only my deputy as competent, it is unlikely that I will be able to develop the other senior staff. This would be most unfortunate – and so I have to match the task to the person. This might mean discussing the issue – say, with the executive – and then seeking volunteers. Such an outcome can be very fruitful, but it is still time-consuming. Finally, if the task involves close interaction with certain people – perhaps the parents or the teachers in the junior grades – I must make sure that my delegate has some empathy with that group, or the whole project might prove disastrous.

If the task is indeed delegable and the proposed delegate is suitable, we must then ensure that there are adequate instructions available, that the task is properly resourced and that the delegate actually has the time to complete it. It also means that we discuss with this person the standard that will be acceptable – after all, if the delegate has no prior experience



in this field, the final product might not be as good as we ourselves would provide.

Delegation involves risks

Presumably, we have been given our positions because we are competent. The delegate will not necessarily have that level of competence and so the end product might not match the standard that people are used to. It is also possible that once the task has been started, the delegate might discover that it is too difficult, and a rescue operation might be necessary – one that completes the task, that preserves the dignity of the delegate, and that can be done along with all the other things already on our plate.

There is clearly a danger that if we have asked someone else to carry out a task and that person has had to abandon the project, there might not be the necessary time for us to take back control and achieve the original goal. This is one of the reasons that we need to monitor progress carefully – as we will see shortly.

Since the underlying motive for delegation was to provide a meaningful task for a subordinate, and thus gain experience for future advancement, it would be a disaster if the abandoned project became a cause for this person to lose self-confidence. Any failure in this realm must be handled sensitively so that the learner can still grow from the experience.

Delegation must be practical

When deciding whether to delegate a task, we must consider the desired result. If the required standard of the work is such that only a person who has already done this sort of work before could possibly achieve it, we should not delegate it. Preparing an annual report for ACARA might be high level task but if we delegate it to a novice, we can easily provide previous reports as examples to follow. However, if someone is asked to deliver an address at the school's centenary, I might decide to retain that responsibility for myself. If this happens, it is valuable to consider another task that would offer the staff member some intermediate experience. However, we must also avoid delegating 'busy work' – the sort of task that is really quite unimportant and is actually demeaning for the delegate. Likewise, we must not delegate tasks when we know that the outcome will end up on the local tip.

The buck stops with you

Every fortnight, a certain amount of money is deposited into your bank account to reimburse you for your efforts over the previous two weeks; the size of that reimbursement reflects the responsibility that you have. That responsibility remains even if you delegate certain roles to other (less well paid) colleagues. You can delegate authority to perform a task but you cannot hand over responsibility.

A few years ago I accompanied a group of students to Italy for a cultural and language excursion. The planning for the event fell squarely

on the very competent shoulders of one of my teachers. She did everything from preparing the itinerary to designing a distinctive hoodoo that all students would wear for ease of identification. However, when I was discussing this delightful feature with a fellow principal, he pointed out to me that she might be doing the work, but I was the one with the responsibility. "If you lose a student," he warned me, "it will be your head, not hers, that falls." Small wonder I spent the fortnight counting and recounting my protégés.

There are several other features of a well-delegated task, and a casual glance at any useful management book will alert us to these. Some of the points that seem to recur regularly in the literature include:

- Explain why you are delegating. Your motives might vary and they might be mixed. Perhaps you are currently too busy, or this type of work is not on your list of 100 Favourites or you are keen to develop additional skills in your colleagues. Whatever the reason, be upfront about it.
- Make allowance for different working styles. The person to whom we delegate a job might work differently to you and me; this is no cause for concern. The end result is what is needed, not the process.
- Delegate and let go. There is nothing worse than being given a job only to find that your superior is breathing down your neck all the time to see how you are going. There is nothing developmental about this; it destroys confidence and denies the delegate the feeling of achievement. Delegation works best when you tell the person what to do, not how to do it.
- Delegate but don't lose interest. Make sure that your co-worker knows that you are available for support when needed, or to supply essential resources (especially time). Also let it be known that you will be keeping an eye on progress, especially as deadlines approach; this means that the most effective delegations are those where both parties are fully aware of time lines and progress points.
- Maintain a watching brief. Realising that the success of this task remains within your provenance, you don't want it to go wrong. Stay aware of what is happening, but without being obtrusive about it.
- Remember the value of praise. Both during the process and at the end, be ready to praise your delegate sincerely for what has been achieved and make sure that superiors are also aware of this person's success.

Three special cautions

It seems to me that there are three special cautions to when delegating a task. The first refers to the use of technology; the second to the need to avoid 'bounce back'; and the third to making delegation a prominent feature of your staff development program.

Regular readers of *Education Today* already know the immense value of the advice given by

Robyn Pearce. Her 2003 e-book, *Getting a Grip on the Paper War*, is a classic blend of sensible instruction and readable style. Not surprisingly, she advocates using technology to maintain control of your delegation, especially if you are one of those talented people who has recognised that delegation should be a constant feature of your leadership. Wise use of technology prevents you handing over a task and then forgetting to whom you gave it, or the date by which they had to have the task finished. (See pp.232–3 for her ideas on how to optimise this technology.)

One problem with delegating is that your delegate might continue to ask you what to do and how to do it. Try to avoid this happening or both parties will lose out; the delegates will not learn independence and the delegators will double their workload as they end up doing two jobs – their own and the delegated task. Again Robyn has an interesting solution: insist that when your colleague comes to you seeking a solution, they must first develop two possible solutions of their own to place on the table. "If they're forced to do the thinking for themselves, pretty soon you'll find that they don't come for that extra reassurance and you will not be interrupted unnecessarily." (ET Issue 3, 2014, pp. 46–47) It might also be useful to reread *The One Minute Manager Meets the Monkey* by Ken Blanchard and others. It cautions us to avoid allowing our subordinates to pass their problems back to us for solutions.

Finally, the April 2012 issue of *Leader Newsletter* had some very practical advice to help us get started on the road towards effective delegation. (This monthly newsletter should be on every Principal's reading list; it is brief, practical and free from www.Skills2Lead.com.) The writer ends with this challenge:

As an action plan, answer these three questions:

- 1 What am I currently doing that I should be delegating?
- 2 What am I avoiding giving up? Why?
- 3 What is the next thing I will delegate, when, and to whom?

I would suggest that if you can seriously consider these questions, you will find that not only is your own career likely to be more effective, but so will those of your staff. Delegation is indeed the key to succession, and if we are really serious about supporting (educating?) our staff, it is a tool that we cannot neglect.

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