

Effective Delegation: The Heart of Motivation

By

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When leaders ask me how to motivate people, I start by saying, “You can’t motivate people. Hire motivated people and then try not to demotivate them.” When they ask how to avoid demotivating them, I have a simple answer: “Delegate.”

Top performers crave the feelings of accomplishment that come from doing a job well. The more complicated the issue, the greater the feelings of satisfaction. But too many don’t feel responsible for outcomes, largely because of their boss’s menacing presence in the middle of things, often micromanaging. The antidote? Effective delegation.

Delegation sounds simple—which it is—but it’s not easy. If you fail to delegate, you rob yourself of precious time; you deny your direct reports the opportunity to grow; and you also deprive the organization of the chance to have more highly skilled people on its bench.

Delegation will trump motivation—every time. To keep your people focused, engaged, and motivated, consider the following:

1. Know your direct reports and their capabilities. Be sure the people to whom you are delegating have the initiative, motivation, skills, abilities, and experience to handle the task.
2. Delegate to the lowest possible level, along with the authority to carry out decisions.
3. Clarify expectations. Discuss how the objectives support the strategy, and outline the tactics for achieving the goals. Talk about what needs to be done, but let them decide how they will go about it.
4. Delegate entire projects, not pieces of it. Allow the person to “own” the task.
5. Agree on priorities.

6. Clarify areas of accountability, not just for tasks but for decisions too. Grant authority and freedom to get the job done. Let people sign their names to their work, making them personally responsible for its quality and accuracy.
7. Discuss timelines and status updates, generally a 30/60/90/ end of the year format for assessing results works well. Break large projects into manageable pieces.
8. Provide resources and support.
9. Mentor and coach as needed.
10. Listen to feedback and avoid jumping in to fix problems.

To begin the process, ask your direct reports to list the major decisions they currently make. Then, using the assigned code of the following accountability chart, indicate what level of involvement the direct report thinks appropriate: make the decision alone, notify you but proceed without further authorization, or consult with you before going forward.

You can retain as much control as you think appropriate. You will encourage the development of your people if you not only allow them to make their own decisions but also insist on it. Here's a variation of models that have been used in the worlds of project management and national defense:

Directions: Identify the major decisions that you make on a somewhat routine basis. Then, using the letters at the top, identify, not necessarily what you're currently doing, but the level of accountability that you think is appropriate.

If you are responsible for the outcome but don't have the authority to make the decision alone, put an R under your name and the appropriate letter under your boss's name or the name of the person who needs to be involved.

Accountability Chart

- A = Authority to make decisions alone*
- R = Responsibility for completing the task*
- N = Notification—Person is notified of decision*
- C = Consultation—This person must OK the decision before you proceed.*

<i>Major Decision/Task</i>	<i>Direct Report</i>	<i>Boss</i>	<i>Other's Name</i>	<i>Other's Name</i>

This is a fluid document that should change periodically. In fact, many leaders think it helps to put timelines on each decision. Others find that putting parameters around certain decisions helps too. For instance, working together, you and your direct reports may decide that up to a certain dollar amount, they will make the call; at another level, they will notify you; at a higher one they will consult with you before moving ahead.

When you start to notice direct reports making good decisions at one level of difficulty or complexity, give them more rein. If you don't see progress, that's critical data too. Even though this process takes time initially (usually about an hour with each direct report) you will reap the reward of hours a week that you'll get back. You won't face the problem of direct reports *not* wanting more challenges and freedom to make decisions, but you may encounter your own fears of giving up control. What if they don't do the job as well as you do? That's a likely scenario, but with your coaching and feedback, they can learn to do things reasonably well—maybe not perfectly, but at least successfully. Remember, the goal is success, not perfection. Effective feedback holds the key to this success.

Here are some of the objections that my clients raise when I suggest this. “If my boss comes to me for an answer, I won’t have it at my fingertips.” That’s true. You might have to say, “Karen is taking care of that. I’ll call her and get right back to you.” It’s an illusion to think you are in control of the truly important stuff anyway. If people want create problems, they will. Fortunately, most people don’t set out each day to make a mess of themselves at their jobs. You can spend seventy, eighty, or a hundred hours a week at work, and not matter what you do, you won’t prevent every problem. So why not spend a reasonable number of hours at work, have some free time to recharge, and accomplish more in the long run?

Another argument I hear is, “They will still come to me for every little thing.” They will if you let them. You have made them dependent on you, so they won’t want to be responsible for things that you were always willing to take the hit for. When they call, email, or drop by for “just a minute,” ask them where that issue is on their accountability chart. Then tell them you have complete faith in their ability to handle things, and they should come back only if they are stuck or don’t know what to do. If they come to you for an answer, don’t give one. Ask them what they think one or two ideas are for solving the problem are, and then tell them to go do the right thing.

Trust me. Adjusting *their* behavior won’t be as tough as adjusting your own. They are probably hungry to feel more connected to their work, more responsible for their own outcomes. In general, decisions should be made at the lowest possible level, but with that comes the authority to carry them out. You can’t jump in and fix things if there is a glitch. You can coach them through it, but if you are there to clean up after them, what is their motivation to do it right?