3 Creating a “Delegation Map”

Delegation = “to entrust to another”
Patrick Sanaghan (2012)

We could easily write a book on delegation because it is an important leadership and management skill. It is also one of the most misunderstood and abused practices in organizations.

First, a definition from the dictionary: “The assignment of authority and responsibility to another person to carry out specific activities. The person who delegates the work remains accountable for the final outcome of the delegated work.”

At its best, delegation:

- Helps build the skills and capacities of others. This is an essential element in the process. Delegation is not “dumping” an assignment on someone else's lap or to clear off someone else's desk.
- Empowers employees to take on important tasks and responsibilities and contribute to the organization's goals.
- Builds employees' thinking and strategy skills in ways that cannot be tested any other way. Delegation is real work.
- Leverages a work group/team's overall productivity in powerful ways by tapping the talents and resources of its members.

Effective delegation takes real thought and time to do well. Some things to consider:

1. The supervisor/leader needs to carefully explain the assignment, provide a rationale (why this is important) and explain the larger context (how this fits into where we are going/what we are trying to accomplish).
2. Both parties need to agree on the final product and outcome. Both need to be on the same page about expectations and what it will look like when finished.
3. Both need to agree on realistic deadlines and milestones. (A caution here: many employees want to impress their boss and can be over zealous about how fast they can complete an assignment).
4. Both parties need to agree on how they will communicate with each other (e.g. email, face-to-face, telephone check-ins) and how often (e.g. weekly, daily). The supervisor needs to be careful not to micromanage the process.
5. The supervisor needs to help the employee anticipate the “mudpies” or what will get in the way of successful completion of the assignment (e.g., organizational politics, lack of resources, limited experience with the assignment, getting others on board to help).

This is an important element in the delegation process and needs to be lead by the supervisor. Once again, eager employees might not see the “hurdles” and the supervisor
needs to help them anticipate these.

6. The supervisor needs to “clear off the plate” of the employee. They need to create the time and space to do the assignment. You cannot just give someone a new assignment on top of an already full workload. The supervisor must help them remove things from their “to do” list so they can accomplish the new task.

*(Later in this paper we will show how to do this.)*

7. The supervisor needs to inform relevant parties about the employee’s assignment and provide them with the political capital and decision making authority to complete their task.

*For example, if the Provost is assigning someone to create a cross-curricular student leadership program, they might need to speak to some deans as well as the V.P. of student affairs.*

8. It is very important that the supervisor **encourage questions.** It is essential that the employee really understand the assignment, scope, deliverables, level of authority and expectations. Sometimes, employees are reluctant to ask a lot of questions because they might appear stupid, not confident or negative. Other people are not good “thinking on their feet” and need time to digest the information. It is helpful to have the supervisor check in with the person the next day to see if they have any more questions *(they almost always do).*

9. It is important to discuss how the supervisor and employee will handle “problems” and challenges. It is inevitable that implementation problems will occur. It is important that the employee bring their problems to the supervisor sooner rather than later. Encourage the employee to come to the discussion with some suggestions about how to deal with the problems or the supervisor will be the victim of “reverse delegation”.

*(We would suggest both parties read the classic article on reverse delegation, “Management Time: Who's Got the Monkey?” suggested in the Resources section of this paper.)*

10. Lastly, it is important for the employee to understand two things:

   - Why they have been chose for the new assignment *(e.g., they have a great work ethic, a creative approach to things, great at relationships, experience with a project).* It is always nice to hear that your talents and gifts are recognized, appreciated and utilized.

   - What’s in it for them! The employee should understand that they: will develop new skills, interact with new people throughout the organization, gain exposure to senior leadership, receive a raise or bonus upon completion, gain recognition.
The following are some useful resources for those interested in understanding the complexity and usefulness of effective delegation: