

Management and the Five R's of Delegation

By Colm McCormack. February, 2009.

Delegation can be dangerous

Far too many people have told me over the years that, "A manager's job is to delegate". What this simple little nugget generally creates is a rush to dump tasks and responsibilities on others without first learning some crucial first steps. You simply cannot delegate to everybody who works with you. Doing so creates problems on several fronts. For instance, if the person has not been trained in the task delegated to them you run the risk of it being completed poorly – if completed at all. Some people – no matter how good they are at their job – just don't want extra responsibility, promotion, extra anything over and above their daily grind. Delegating to such people will de-motivate them, hit morale, and a whole host of other problems. But the key point is that by choosing to delegate without some key first steps, you run the risk of adversely increasing the demands made of you and the constraints under which you must operate.

Getting To The "How" Part

In this article, I want to skip over who you should delegate to, what you should delegate, when to delegate, why you should delegate, and get to the last part of the "how" aspect.¹ If you have

¹ The what, when, who, why, etc., are covered in: **Just Manage THEM!** *Effective People Management for Today's Manager*. Go to:

read the first book in the "**Just Manage It!**" series – *If You Cannot Manage Yourself You Cannot Manage Others* – you will be aware of my focus on employee behavior and my use of Professor Stewart's theory of Demands, Constraints, Choices.² With that in mind let me now introduce you to what I term the "Five R's of Delegation".

Play It Back

The first R is Repeat. Always keep in mind that some employees simply don't want extra responsibility. Some will nod in agreement yet not fully understand what has been said. Some are afraid to ask for clarification. So you have described what you want the employee to do. They have said they will get to it. Now introduce certainty and the opportunity for clarification by getting the employee to repeat back to you what it is you want them to do. It's simple and only takes a matter of seconds. For example, they should hit all the main points: "You want me to order all products for my department, each order to go out every Monday morning, I'm

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² See the extensive work and numerous books of Professor Rosemary Stewart of Templeton College, University of Oxford in the United Kingdom. A brief overview can be had from: *Demands, Constraints, Choices and Discretion: An Introduction to the Work of Rosemary Stewart*. The Leadership Quarterly, 14, (2003) 193-238.

not to exceed \$10,000 without first consulting you, but other than that or any other unforeseen problems I need only get back to you the last Friday morning of every month at 10am with brief progress reports”.

Hearing all of those main points with the surround talk removed lets you know that the person has the entirety of what is required and has not gotten so wrapped up in all the other discussion as to have missed the point entirely.

Send a Reminder

The second R is Remind. After your brief meeting with them, send them an email or memo. Keep it short and cover the main points only. You’re not out to create a blizzard of paperwork thereby complicating matters and adding to your list of to-dos. Don’t introduce anything new or start discussing matters again. This email or memo serves as a reminder to both of you. It restates what you have said and what the employee should have repeated back to you thereby avoiding future conflict should any gap between expectation and result arise.

Start Locking It In

The third R is Reinforce. Asking the employee to repeat the main points of the discussion back to you and sending the email or memo after the meeting reinforces each step in their mind and in yours too. The email or memo also serves as a reference for them to revisit if later confused and as a road map with guide posts for them to follow.

Leave a Trail

The fourth R is Record. You now have an agreed upon “official” record of what is to be done, who is to do it, the timelines, etc. This avoids conflict and confusion in the future. With this, you have introduced clear accountability for completion of the task.

Interestingly, it also empowers the employee in terms of providing a record of responsibilities taken on over the course of a given year. It also enables employee development, serves as an indicator to you for future promotional considerations, and more.

Always Go Back To Take a Look

The fifth and final R is Return. Delegating to someone without ever returning to the matter takes us back to a previous article on [Management and the “All Blame Migrates” principle](#).³ There, I pointed out that upfront effort enables a manager to avoid blame for poor results migrating to him in the future. There are of course two extremes here – micromanaging and abdicating the management task. Returning to the issue at agreed points along the timeline avoids you falling into either extreme and enables you to revisit the issue without offending, annoying, or intruding upon the person to whom you have delegated the task.

Don’t Forget the Parts We Skipped Over to Get Here

I encourage you to read **Just Manage THEM!** *Effective People Management For Today’s Manager* – the second book in

³ Go to: www.ColmMcCormack.com and click the FREE web articles button to read and download.

the “**Just Manage It!**” series - for a more detailed and complete discussion on the topic of delegation. As was pointed out above, we have skipped over key areas such as why you should delegate, how and what to delegate, when to delegate, etc. Once those areas are familiar to you, you can supplement them with the Five R’s to increase the likelihood for success, to lessen confusion, and to increase commitment, buy-in, and performance.

Remember, when dealing with management and employees, behavior is key. The Five R’s aid you in locking-in desired behavior but, more importantly, it is *your* behavior as a manager when delegating that can move you toward or away from truly effective delegation.

A little extra upfront effort before setting employees loose to perform tasks or exercise new responsibilities can save you hours – and sometimes months – of managing yourself out of a bad situation that can arise if the right foundation is not laid in the beginning. Being consistent in this regard, i.e. getting everything right before pressing the start button, is not just consistency, it is what I have come to describe as “[Positive Consistency](#)”, a principle I highly recommend you become familiar with if you have not already done so.⁴



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⁴ “Positive Consistency” appears as a main management principle in book 1 of the series: **Just Manage It! If You Cannot Manage Yourself You Cannot Manage Others**. For descriptions of the models and concepts within that book, for Free chapter downloads and to order your own copy of the book, go to: www.ColmMcCormack.com