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Briefing Notes:
Delegation and the Work of Worry Among Tops, Middles, and the Front Line

As organizations have become more complex, there has become a wish for a “boundaryless” company—most famously advocated for by Jack Welch when he was leading General Electric: *“Our dream for the 1990s is a boundaryless company, a company where we knock down the walls that separate us from each other on the inside and from our key constituencies on the outside.”*

But Welch has confused boundaries with barriers. Barriers are boundaries that have become closed. The result of closed boundaries is like death because the entity is unable to win resources from the environment to create and export valued products or services (Hirschhorn and Gilmore, 2003).

Paradoxically, paying attention to boundaries can be the path to greater effective collaboration, as Miller and Rice (1967) note:

“When managers cannot define and manage key boundaries frontier skirmishing is inevitable. It is perhaps a major paradox of complex enterprises that the more certainly boundaries can be located, the easier good communication can be established. Unless this occurs, different people will draw the boundary in different places and confusion will ensue. In the individual this confusion leads to breakdown; in enterprises, to inefficiency and failure.”

Effective leaders manage both exchanges with the external environment and, internally, across levels and functions. In essence, a top leader’s role is making sense of the challenges and opportunities externally and translating those into direction and resource allocation internally. The leader’s added value is exactly this absorption of uncertainty that makes the inside of the organization or unit more focused, productive, and able to create value.

As leaders tap into the capabilities of their staff and authorize them within defined areas of responsibility, the role of management moves toward the boundary of a unit: linking, integrating, protecting, challenging, etc. The key skills are setting the goals for the staff, giving considerable freedom in how one reaches them, and managing the learning process from getting feedback to the group—all boundary activities that provide the group with elbow room to own how they take up the work.

Paradoxically, moving to the boundary and being less involved in actually directing the work means that more managers find themselves in the middle: across levels in the hierarchy, among customers and producers, or among peers.

Oshry (1995) has articulated four “positions” or roles in all systems and settings that we find ourselves in as illustrated in the table below.

Positions	Their World	Their Experience	Their Image (from the Perspective of Others)
<i>Tops</i>	Complex, yet they feel responsible	Isolated, under-appreciated	Aloof, detached, arrogant, unresponsive,
<i>Middles</i>	Diffuse, disconnected	Committed, torn	Well-intentioned and powerless
<i>Bottoms/Front Line</i>	Lack direction, turn to each other, want meaningful work	Vulnerable, lots of problems	Solidarity, inflexible, resistant
<i>Clients/customers</i>	Desire timely, quality, reasonably priced responses to their needs	Neglected	Demanding, over-involved, pushy

Oshry notes that we can move across these positions as we take up different aspects of work. A CEO may mostly be in a Top role, but when before the board is a Middle, is a front line briefer with stock analysts, and may be a customer (or “Client”) as he or she asks for information from the Benefits department. Given the increased prevalence of fluid organizations and less clearly defined roles, more and more people at all levels of a hierarchy experience the position of “middleness” (Oshry, 1988):

“The condition in which one or one’s group exists between two other groups, one each of lower and higher status or power. These uppers and lowers, which have competing agendas, each expect the middle person to act on their behalf, and the middle who does so is frequently viewed as well intentioned but confused and incompetent. Middles often feel low in energy, isolated from other middles and disempowered.”

Just when they are feeling most pulled apart and overwhelmed by their interactions with all the different parts, Middles need to stay open and use their knowledge to integrate and relate different parts together.

Therefore, a key skill of the “new leadership” is greater comfort with being vulnerable, with not being in control, with not knowing, and even with not knowing what you don’t know. If one is unable to tolerate this state, one inevitably will try to keep up on an impossibly large range of issues on the chance that a Top will ask for an update.

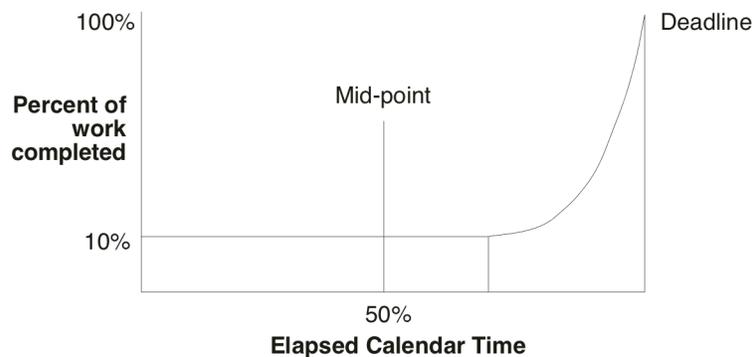
In the exhibit below, we describe a brief delegation case across three positions/levels that powerfully explores these dynamics. Like a Rorschach test, with minimal information, respondents project into the case some of the typical dynamics that they experience. We first describe the case and the requested three questions. We then explore some of the patterns and responses from engaging managers in many executive development sessions.

Exhibit 1: A Case of Delegation Dynamics Across Levels

Let's explore a simple case involving three levels: Top, Middle and Front Line.

Ted (Top) delegates an issue to Mark (Middle), and in a reasonable scope discussion the task and a one-month deadline for its completion are set. It is understood that Mark will be using Fred, Frank, and Fanny (Front Line staff) from Mark's unit in the accomplishment of this work. Two weeks elapse.

Like most professional projects, when half the time has elapsed, only one-tenth of the work has been done; most professional work is deadline-driven with 80 percent of the work being accomplished during the final 20 percent of the time period. See the diagram below.



Imagine that at the two-week mark, Ted happens to bump into Fred and casually inquires about the work, and gets the sense that they are just getting started.

Upon returning to his office, Ted phones Mark and says, "How are you doing on Project X? I got a sense from one of your team members that you are just getting started. I would like a progress report tomorrow afternoon in my office."

Jot down your quick responses to each of the following questions:

1. What are you thinking and feeling as Ted makes this request?
2. What is your strategy? What do you want the outcome to be?
3. What is your first line of dialog in response to Ted's question, "How are you doing on Project X? I got a sense from one of your team you are just getting started. I would like a progress report tomorrow afternoon in my office"?

Here is an example of one person's response:

1. **Thinking and Feeling:** Let me manage my own time. Why did you ask one of my team? Who on my team is talking out of turn?
2. **Strategy:** Communicate that the team is on schedule (even if you are not).
3. **First line of dialog:** "We are on track but can meet if it will make you feel better."

Learning from the Enactments

Participants are invited to pair up (or form trios with one in an observing role) so that one takes the role of Ted (Top) and the other Mark (Middle). As is the case in real life, we often "act our way to new thinking." Thus, rather than having participants discuss their answers to the questions, we have the pairs immediately enact the question and response, and then play it out for several minutes.

Enactment

Ted (Top) begins by asking, "How are you doing on Project X? I got a sense from one of your team you are just getting started. I would like a progress report tomorrow afternoon in my office." Mark (Middle) must respond with what he or she has written as their first line of dialog.

Then, they are to continue the conversation back and forth until they have both gotten a sense of the trajectory or likely outcome of the conversation.

All are then invited to journal briefly answering the following questions before reflecting with one another or exploring patterns and dynamics as a group:

- What do you sense was or will be the outcome of the exchange: a meeting, when, with whom, or a report, etc.? How does it align with the written strategy the Middle hoped to take?
- Who do you think the Middle will talk with after this meeting and what will be the focus of that conversation? Will the anonymous Front Line staff come into the conversation?
- In light of the outcome, what value or learning do you think has been added or debited both for this issue and for the organizational culture and norms?

Patterns from many different organizational settings: corporate, large nonprofits, and medical schools

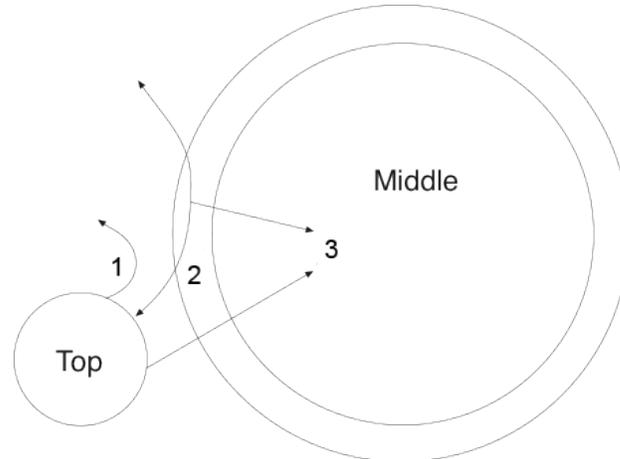
When the dynamic is enacted for several exchanges, in most cases the outcome is that there will be a meeting the next afternoon. Yet most of the respondents actually think it's not the best use of the Top's, Middle's or Front Line's time.

When all participants are invited to think about when they are in the Top position in this dynamic, do they want compliance from Middles? They say no, they want a good exchange that keeps the focus on ensuring a high quality result by the deadline.

There is often a striking lack of inquiry on both sides—the Middle asking, “What has changed that might be relevant since the delegation?” Or even, “What has caused you to be worried?” Or the Top might say, “Maybe I have jumped the gun too quickly after my conversation with the Front Line. What is your sense of where you are with the project?”

Below are some actual examples of Middle's responses that illustrate difference ways of negotiating the boundaries across roles.

Response	Boundary Message	Likely Dynamic
1. “We're right on schedule.”	Trust me. I'm in control; I'm not worried; keep off of my turf.	Escalate, Top may push more. Middle may be angry with Front Line source.
2. “Are we still targeting the original completion date, or has something changed that I should know about?”	Let's revisit the original delegation. I am open to rescoping if there is some relevant change.	Revisiting the stakes and timetable—negotiating if the meeting will be helpful and if so, when?
3. “We will review for you tomorrow our progress to see where we are and make any necessary changes.”	Compliance. Abdication of one's ownership of the delegation.	Anger towards Front Line for what they said. Stress on the Front Line from fire drill to create report that may or may not help the real work. Future hovering by Middle to be ready to report on all delegations “just in case the Top asks.”



Note the triangular dynamics. A Top, in a casual conversation, is made anxious by an honest response from the Front Line. This triggers the Top to call the Middle—not in inquiry mode, but with a request for a report the next day. In instances like this, the Middle often feels betrayed by the Front Line.

From these micro moments of difficulty, often a dysfunctional culture emerges of mistrust and saluting up rather than real collaboration around the substance. For example, a Middle asking, “Why are you asking for updates from my staff instead of from me?” might be risky but could lead to some joint reflection about a culture of hovering delegation—first of a Top over a Middle, and then a Middle over the Front Line—versus an accountable culture where people meet their deadlines. Without inquiry, the group is on a trip to Abilene (Harvey, 1988) in which overloaded folks become more so when they are compliant with what each thinks the other wants. Even more insidious is that the frustrations often get vented with outsiders, for example, the Top tells her spouse, “I have to stay on top of everything; if I had not required a report, we would not have gotten the job done.” The Middle also vents frustration to his spouse, “We not only had to do the work but had to manage Top’s anxiety in addition.”

Leadership at every level of an organization is managing these boundaries. It involves making judgments and taking risks deciding when to resist, when to negotiate, and when to let someone in. Given the increased rate of change, many re-negotiations will be necessary. These are greatly facilitated by an organizational climate of “psychological safety” (Edmondson, 1999) that encourages inquiry, direct talk, and negotiation, rather than compliance. The challenge is to see each of these moments as a choice to help shape that culture, but at some risk.

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