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Briefing Notes:
Developing One's Delegation Capacities

Delegation is one of the most difficult skills to maintain or master because it is a developmental process for both delegator and delegatee. Just as either party feels comfortable, it is time to push the envelope again. It is built upon a *two-way* relationship between "delegator" and "delegatee." Thus, the style and substance of delegation will need to differ depending upon the changing capabilities and needs of each party, as well as the specific circumstances. Moreover, the nature of delegation has changed. Delegation has been traditionally conceived of as going in one direction: from a boss to a subordinate. However, with newer organizational forms—including flat hierarchies, matrix organizations and loose couplings—delegation can go up, down and sideways without regard to hierarchical position. In addition to clarity about substance, both parties need to understand the degree of authorization.

Furthermore, delegation is no longer just the situation where the delegator gives a task that the delegatee can do himself, separately. In many settings, a professional pulls in a specialist or subordinate to amplify the professional's capability to do work (e.g., nurse assisting a surgeon in an operating room, analyst running spreadsheet numbers during a deal-making meeting or thinking partner giving advice in a specialty area). In these situations, delegation shapes the productivity of time spent, but does not "free up" the delegator in the same way as assigning work to another.

Traditionally, the emphasis in the literature is on the skill of the delegatee rather than the delegator. Yet, many times the key constraint is located in the boss—we are often our own worst enemy when it comes to leveraging our impact via the effective mobilization of others.

In this briefing note we outline key frameworks and ideas from the literature on delegation and conclude with advice, to both delegatees and delegators on ways that they can improve the effectiveness of their working alliances.

Three Primary Purposes of Delegation

In practice, delegation has three primary purposes.

1. Delegation is a means of achieving results through the actions of others.
2. Delegation is a means of developing the competencies and commitment of staff.
3. Delegation is also a means of freeing up one's time to devote attention to highly important tasks (that often are important but not urgent). Some of these tasks include those for which managers never seem to find time (e.g., reflection, strategizing, etc.) while others are tasks that subordinates cannot or should not perform.

Effective Delegation Skills are Difficult to Acquire and Maintain

Effective use of delegation will not necessarily come easily, because it calls for changes in mindset, assumptions and behaviors that can be difficult for new and veteran delegators alike.

- Especially in professional organizations, leaders and managers are accustomed to contributing to projects individually. Thus, they are used to maintaining close control over work's content, pace, quality and presentation in order to "get it right." In contrast, delegation requires a certain amount of "letting go" of control over the work, which can be unpleasant especially when the delegator finds the work to be a source of fun and satisfaction.

- When new, a manager may not feel he or she knows the work well enough to delegate it. However, this tendency to avoid delegation can become a habit over time, trapping the manager in a vicious cycle of under-delegation.

- Managers fail to differentiate the mode of delegating by different characteristics of the delegatees.

- A minority of managers (and delegators generally) even operate on the assumption, in effect, that people can read their minds. They delegate work and expect output that meshes with their expectations, yet they do not communicate the expectations clearly or provide key information. Seasoned delegators usually avoid this problem, but not always.

- Sometimes, managers who wish to be liked by employees avoid delegating duties in order not to "impose" on subordinates.

- Managers can become envious of a subordinate's ability instead of giving credit where it is due and working to develop a deputy or potential replacement.

- Managers are sometimes more comfortable "doing" than "managing," which are fundamentally different jobs and very different frames through which to think about work.

- Finally, managers sometimes allow employees to use verbal gymnastics that keep the responsibility for "next steps" with the manager instead of with the

employee. Thus, the employee waits for the manager to get back to him rather than the manager waiting on the employee.

Effective Delegation: Three Ideas to Hold in Mind Simultaneously

When thinking about delegation, it is important to simultaneously hold three ideas in mind.

1. Rather than a single management style regarding delegation, managers and other delegators need a continuum of styles that are indexed to their colleagues' particular developmental paths. These styles range along a sequence from direction on one side of the scale, to coaching, supporting and, finally, to an emphasis on delegation at the other side.

2. Good managers and delegators should carefully use delegation to develop employees' competence and commitment, attributes upon which effective "empowerment" depends. The goal is to help delegatees proceed from dependence to independence by expanding their comfort zones and potential.

3. The delegator must be assertive about managing his or her own time while remaining mindful of delegatees' needs and requirements.

The next three sections describe ways and frameworks to help apply these ideas.

Getting Things Done Through Situational Management: Different Employees Need Different Management Styles
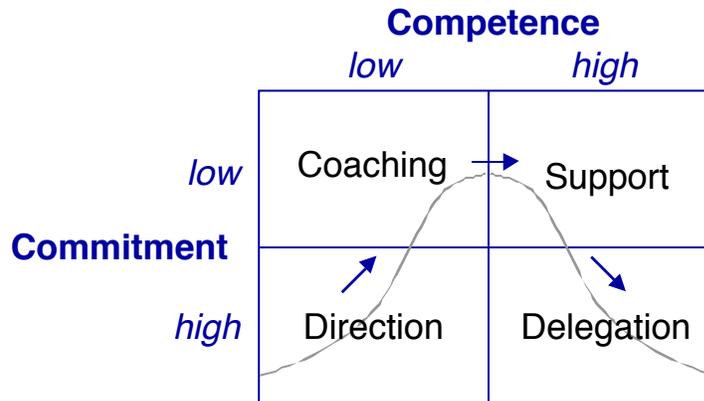
Situational Management

Blanchard, et al. (1985) argued that two ingredients determine a person's performance or achievement: competence and commitment. Competence refers to knowledge and skills, while commitment is a combination of confidence in a person's ability to get the work done and motivation to do it well. Different employees have different levels of these ingredients. The authors' key insight was that an individual employee's mix of competence and commitment should determine the appropriate management style and level of delegation to use with them. They explained these ideas as a sequence.

1. *Directing.* For example, a new employee is likely to be highly enthusiastic (have high commitment) but probably has a lot of ground to cover to gain competence in the work. That employee will need primarily *directing*.

2. *Coaching.* Little by little, the employee climbs the learning curve. Thus, competence is somewhat higher, but the process of learning is difficult. His or her confidence might be vulnerable, and motivation might suffer under work-related stress. Thus, he or she will still need direction to increase competence. In addition, he or she will need support, praise

and involvement in decision-making to increase commitment and to get through the difficult time. Blanchard et al. call this *coaching.*

3. *Supporting.* Still later, once the employee achieves a relatively high level of competence, he or she will still need basic support including praise and advice. This calls for *supporting.*

4. *Delegating.* Ultimately, high competence and commitment in the employee are married together, and the manager can enjoy *delegating*—turning over responsibility for day-to-day decision making.


Source: Adapted from Blanchard (1985)

In sum, this model describes a progression of situational management styles (directing, coaching, supporting and delegating) that are necessary as employees (or any kind of delegatee) develop competence and commitment. Each stage in the progression also has implications for what managers should do if they wish to use delegation as one of their employee development tools. Empirical research by Yukl and Fu (1999) is notably consistent with these conclusions.

Drucker's Advice on Getting Work Done

Consistent with the theme of situational management, Peter Drucker argued that managers should delegate based on what he calls "differential advantage." Imagine there are three tasks that need to be done: A, B and C. The manager could do each of them well (or passably), but employees could also do them. What should be delegated?
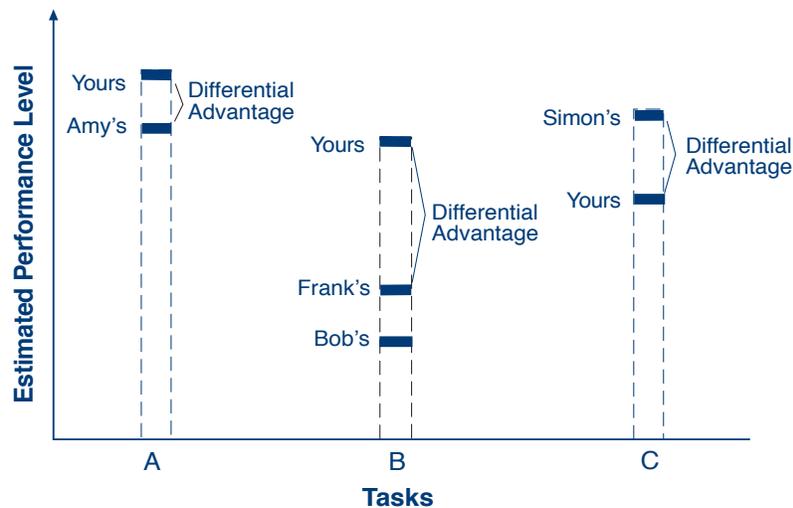
Drucker suggests estimating the performance level of an employee for a given task and then comparing that level to the manager's own estimated performance level. Where the manager has a small differential advantage (Task A) or the employee has a differential advantage (Task C), the manager might wish to delegate the task. However, where the manager has a large differential advantage (Task B), he or she should consider keeping the task. Note that the manager in this hypothetical case has a particularly high performance level for Task A. If the manager also enjoys this work (and less so with Tasks B or C), his or her inclination may be to keep Task A when perhaps keeping Task B would be better for the organization.

Thus, a key implication of "differential advantage" analysis is that effective leaders give up tasks they are very good at, and which they may find satisfying, when someone else is "good enough." In addition, they take on work that they may find difficult or less enjoyable, but where they are by role or skill the best choice from the overall organization's perspective.

Of course, if there is time for developing an employee and the employee has the necessary potential, Task B could become a tool for developmental delegation—perhaps with the manager acting in a coaching or supporting role.

Developmental Delegation: Creating Opportunities for Growth

The power of developmental delegation is partly revealed by Blanchard, et. al.'s model of situational management. By moving staff, superiors or colleagues along the path from direction to delegation, the manager (or other delegator) improves employee skills, bolsters employee confidence and commitment and eventually builds the organization's capacity to get things done effectively while creating discretionary time for himself or herself. In addition to the situational leadership model, however, Heller (1998) suggests additional considerations to remember when using delegation to help develop employees.

- *Reinforce a delegatee's role.* When appointing delegatees, clearly state the

delegatee's role to team members and external stakeholders. This builds a support network for the delegatee's task while creating line-of-sight among the team to help the delegatee to accept ownership and accountability.

- *Provide support.* During virtually all stages of an assignment, delegatees will need positive support. Sources of support include provision of information, time, resources and encouragement. The delegator should also be open to the possibility of a delegatee needing extra help in some circumstances.

- *Give feedback.* One of the most powerful ways to promote a person's growth is to provide timely feedback, both formally and informally, as a part of two-way communication. Both formal and informal feedback provide an opportunity to recognize and analyze achievements, discuss problems and identify solutions.

- *Praise and reward.* It is important to give credit where credit is due, both one-on-one and publicly. The manager should identify faults and errors. However, praise and reward play more important parts in motivating future commitment and performance.

- *Analyze difficulties.* If things do not go according to plan, the delegator and delegatee should analyze and learn from difficulties that are encountered. Problems can come from many sources, including unclear instructions, insufficient delegatee skills/experience, a changing environment or incongruent organizational procedures. Whatever the difficulties they are to be learned from with an eye to future progress.

- *Develop your own delegation skills.* The delegator should avoid being complacent about his or her own performance as a delegator. Delegators should proactively seek training, coaching and feedback from a variety of sources.

Delegation to Free Up the Delegator's Time for Important Tasks

Who's Got the Monkey?

Oncken and Wass (1974) wrote a famous article about how managers can lose valuable discretionary time when they allow subordinates to put the "monkey" (i.e., the next step in a work relationship) on the managers' backs rather than take on the burden themselves. In response to this threat, Oncken and Wass identified five rules to help preserve a manager's discretionary time.

- Monkeys (the tasks) should either be "fed" (paid attention to) or shot (eliminated). Otherwise, they starve and waste discretionary time that is devoted to "postmortems or attempted resurrections."

- The monkey population should be kept below what the manager has time to handle.

- Monkeys should be fed without having to hunt them down. In other words, feed monkeys by managing them through appointments.

- Monkeys should be fed face-to-face or by telephone, but not by mail (or e-mail), where miscommunication is all too easy.

- Each monkey should have a previously agreed upon "degree of initiative" that the subordinate is authorized to use as well as a planned "next feeding time."

Drucker's Advice on Freeing Up Managerial Time

Peter Drucker has additional advice for the time-pressed manager. Managers often feel time constrained, because they are too involved in the daily routine. That naturally causes the feeling of being overworked and overwhelmed. One possible solution is simply to avoid doing most things that can be delegated. If something routine keeps coming across the manager's desk, perhaps that task can be delegated. What if this simple rule is not realistic? For example, what if the manager has a lack of confidence in the ability of staff to accomplish some of these tasks? In that case, the purpose of delegation may need to become more developmental in nature, deferring the objective of freeing up time until later, when the delegatee has greater competence and/or commitment.

Drucker has noted that much "wasted time" is unavoidable for managers. Nonetheless, he argued that executives misperceive how much discretionary time they really have. In that light, he offers several ideas for managers to think about in their efforts to free up discretionary time.

- Get data on time use.
- What does not have to be done?
- What is doable by someone else?
- What do I do that wastes the time of others?
- Do not overate your importance.
- Convert crisis to routine.
- Eliminate overstaffing.
- Reduce number of meetings.

When additional time can no longer be freed up, Drucker also suggests methods for improving productivity during the discretionary time that a manager does have.

- *Insulation*—Separating oneself from distractions physically or "do not disturb" rules.
- *Grouping*—Try to schedule periods of discretionary time to be close to one another, which minimizes the costs of having to regather one's thoughts.
- Reserve blocks of time—Schedule a regular block of time during which discretionary time is sacred.

Responsibility Charting

One of the more powerful ways to manage one's own time through delegation, as well as get work done generally, is through using a tool called "responsibility charting" (CFAR, 1997). Responsibility charting imposes a discipline that helps managers to identify major tasks that need to be performed. More importantly, however, responsibility charting is a way to make explicit for the manager and employees who has responsibility for which aspects of a task. For example, the manager might have an approval role, but the responsibility chart will make clear that the responsible person for getting a task done (i.e., is accountable if nothing happens) is an employee. Thus, this tool becomes a way of ensuring that the work gets done while preserving the manager's valuable time for other tasks.

How does responsibility charting work? The various actors in an office or organization are listed along the horizontal axis of a spreadsheet, while individual tasks are listed on the vertical axis.

◄——— Actors ———►

Task or Decision

E.g., Determine 1998 phonathon goal
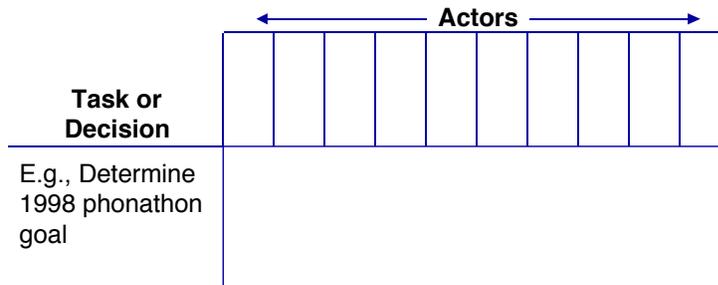
For each task in the spreadsheet, each actor receives one of five possible designations. In this way, responsibility charting helps to discriminate among different levels of delegation.

A = Approve	Sign-off or veto a decision before it is implemented or selected, accountable for decision quality
R = Responsible	Takes initiative, develops alternatives, provides analysis, makes initial recommendations, accountable if nothing happens
C = Consulted	Consulted prior to decision but has no veto power
I = Informed	Notified of decision before public announcement, needs to know outcome for related task
[blank]	A blank indicates no relationship

Effective delegation depends on clear communication of both the task's substance and the nature of the delegation relationship, especially with lateral and upward delegation. Fortunately, as displayed in the following table, responsibility charting establishes a shared language to describe these relationships accurately and quickly.

Delegator	Delegatee	Meaning
A	R	Staff the decision, get the necessary facts, present the options, make a recommendation and bring it to me for final review.
C	A/R	This is your decision, but consult with me to get my views, but you are not bound by my advice, you are accountable for the decision.
A/R	C	Let me keep the decision and manage the fact finding, analysis of options, but give me your best thinking.
I	A/R	This is your decision, merely inform me of the outcome.

Responsibility charting is a powerful tool, because it enables clear communication of *different types* of delegation.

What is Delegated	Responsibility Charting
Duties, but decision making requires superior's approval	Delegator has the "A" Delegatee has the "R"
Duties plus some participation in decision making	Delegator and Delegatee share the "A" Delegatee has the "R"
Duties plus full decision making	Delegatee has the "A" and the "R" Delegator, if he or she has a role, might have "C" or "I"
Involvement	Delegatee has the "C" Delegator has either an "A", "R", or "A/R"

It is important to reiterate that for the "A" role, approval can be exercised directly or it may be delegated. However, *ultimate accountability cannot be delegated*.

Responsibility charting also rapidly reveals all-too-common discrepancies in role perceptions among managers and staff. Differences in these perceptions can contribute to several adverse outcomes, including lack of task accomplishment, emergencies that the manager must take care of and the manager becoming overwhelmed with responsibilities that could have been delegated more efficiently. Using a tool like responsibility charting will facilitate getting work done, rigorous attention to developing employees and managing the manager's time more effectively.

Concluding Advice for Delegators and Delegatees

For Delegatees: Making Good Delegation Happen to Add Value and Grow

For a delegatee, it can be tempting to "just let the boss decide" what is to be done. That sentiment was indeed the model from the past. However, in light of recent decades' culture change in the workplace and new organizational forms, delegatees now have a powerful opportunity to add value to their work and to grow professionally. Both goals can be accomplished if delegatees do two things: take an active role in making good delegation happen and help shape work's content.

Central to this point is the idea of "thinking one level up and one time period out." What does that expression mean? If delegatees try to understand *why* something needs to be done (in addition to the *what*), and if they try to anticipate what things will be needed in the future, and by what time (i.e., relating the *what* to the *when*), they will be in a position to add extraordinary value to the work. Furthermore, they will be in a position to grow professionally by gradually becoming a thinking partner with the delegator.

What makes this possible? Workers are more skilled today than ever before, and managers work in flatter hierarchies than ever before. Thus, good delegators feel that they simply must rely on the creativity, anticipatory thinking and communication skills of delegatees. Indeed, these behaviors are the difference between delegatees who have confidence and commitment and those who do not. Unsurprisingly, good delegators see the powerful potential that resides in this difference. They further recognize and act upon this incentive by developing delegatees' competence and commitment, moving them on the track from direction to delegation. What can delegatees do to "make good delegation happen?" Below are some key steps adapted from CFAR (2001) and Gabarro and Kotter (1993).

- *Understand the delegator*—Appreciate the delegator's goals and pressures along with his or her strengths and weaknesses and preferred styles of communication.

- *Understand yourself*—Become aware which of your preferences impede or facilitate working with the delegator and, with that awareness, take steps to make the relationship more effective by accommodating differences in work style.

- *Get enough context for the project*—Take initiative to understand the motivation for the project, find the story, map the story out, talk with colleagues and continue "connecting the dots" as the project evolves.

- *Get clear enough to start*—Push for clarity of your role while realizing things will not be crystal clear at the outset and sharpen the assignment as you go in consultation with the delegator.

- *Recognize that the rest is discovery*—Take a stab at the problem through hypotheses and build in calibration with the delegator to ensure that you "learn together" and stay on the right track.

- *Make your needs known*—Projects that stretch a person's capabilities can put the project at risk, so make sure you communicate and negotiate your needs with the delegator.

For Delegators: Solutions to "Delegation Dilemmas"

"Delegation dilemmas" exist for delegators in organizational systems that lack tolerance for mistakes, tend to be overly critical of decisions, allow confusion about responsibility and authority and create such a sense of urgency that people feel there is no time to explain. Accordingly, this briefing note concludes with solutions to some of the more pervasive of these dilemmas.

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Causes	Solutions
Insecure in the role of delegator	Learn to recognize. Accept risk as inherent. Allow mistakes. Learn from them.
Lack of confidence in your staff	Train, develop, trust your staff.
Become overly involved in detail and routine	Do less of what you can delegate; avoid getting mired in detail.
Give unclear, incomplete or confused instructions	Ensure clear, unambiguous instructions. Ask subordinates to restate to ensure understanding.
Envious of subordinate's ability	Laugh at yourself. Then give full credit where it is due. Develop your own replacement.
Believe that you alone can do the job better and faster	Lower standards to what is "acceptable." Open your mind to alternative views of what "acceptable" should be. Avoid perfectionism.
More comfortable "doing" than "managing"	Recognize that practice leads to success which leads to comfort. Manage rather than perform tasks.
Expect everyone to "know all the details"	Recognize that this should not be expected of someone who is handling delegated responsibility.
Lack of appropriate controls	Establish plans. Create schedules with details. Provide progress reports. Monitor deadlines.
Overcontrol	Relax. Emphasize goal-accomplishment methods and procedures. Measure results, not just activity.
Fail to follow-up	Always check progress with enough time to take corrective action.

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