

Why Managers Don't Delegate And How To Get Them Do So?

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Introduction

There is a general feeling among employees that senior managers do not delegate adequate authority to their subordinates even in cases of routine assignments. This notion is further strengthened when managers working on the middle or sometimes even top management levels are seen running around checking and sometimes even carrying out petty tasks like preparation of slides for presentations, inspecting seating arrangements for functions and supervising trivial tasks. At times, young employees get flabbergasted over the personal concern of seniors in the form of painful close supervision of those matters which have already been assigned to subordinates. As a matter of fact, instead of delegating appropriate authority to subordinates to carry out their assigned tasks, many managers tend to centralize even the little authority originally vested in junior positions. From organization's side, there seems to be no check on whims of "men of authority" as far as centralization of authority is concerned. On the other hand, resistance from the employees against unjustified, even unlawful in some cases, centralization of authority appears in the form of a "whimper" rather than a forceful protest.

In management literature, the terms 'delegation' and 'decentralization' are used interchangeably though some theorists like to refer to delegation exclusively in such matters where managers provide some or a major portion of the authority, vested in their positions, to

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their subordinates to accomplish certain organizational tasks. On the other hand, they use the term 'decentralization' for such organization structures and procedures which essentially call for formulation of policies and decisions at the lowest possible levels. For the purpose of this article, however, no such distinction is made, and the terms, 'delegation' and 'decentralization' are used interchangeably.

Delegation is not a new concept though it has almost achieved the status of a cliché in the contemporary management literature. In human history, we find reference to delegation in the Holy Bible where Holy Prophet Moses [peace be upon him] asks his disciples to bring only the most important matters to him and decide the routine matters themselves.

Why Decentralization?

As indicated earlier, the concepts of delegation and decentralization have been pampered by most of the management theorists. However, we must seriously think about why we need delegation and decentralization at our work places. Couldn't we carry out our assigned tasks without bothering much about such concepts? In response to such questions, Henry Mintzberg opines,

"Simply because all the decisions cannot be understood at one centre, in one brain. Sometimes the necessary information just cannot be brought to that centre. Perhaps too much of it is soft, difficult to transmit. How can the Baghdad salesperson explain the nature of his clients to the Birmingham manager? Sometimes the information can be transmitted to one centre, but a lack of cognitive capacity [brainpower] precludes it from being comprehended there. How can the President of the conglomerate corporation possibly learn about, say, 100 different product lines? Even if a report could be written on each, he would lack the time to study them all. [Mintzberg, 1979]"

Advantages of Decentralization

Notwithstanding the limitations of decentralization, the concept certainly has some advantages. One, it facilitates easing of unnecessary burden on managers and leaders. Two, it makes leaders more confident of the capabilities of their subordinates. Three, it grooms and encourages managers to take risks. Four, it helps leaders to train and develop their subordinates for future responsibilities in the senior cadres. Five, it raises the level of motivation in the organization due to participation of lower ranks in the decision making and executive processes. Six, it enables the senior managers and leaders to tap available human resources to do things more efficiently and more smoothly at the same time. Seven, it trains managers and leaders to "get it done through others" instead of doing petty jobs themselves. Eight, it brings more efficiency, promptness and timely responsiveness in the organizational matters by doing away with red-tapism. Nine, it encourages managers and leaders to share their privileged information with others for optimum utilization of resources. Ten, information being widely considered as power, information-dissemination contributes to more equitable distribution of power in the hierarchical setup of organizations. And finally, the concept of decentralization fits well in the overall scheme of democratic organizational setup.

Main Factors That Discourage Delegation

Despite all its advantages, decentralization of authority is done only reluctantly. It would hence be in place here to identify the factors that induce in leaders, a preference for centralization.

Unawareness of Leaders concerning Significance of Delegation

There is no dearth of leaders in all types of organizations, who are simply not aware of the prime importance of delegation of authority to subordinates. They do not know what advantages are linked with delegation and, therefore, they tend to centralize most of the authority within their positions and sometimes even within their personality.

Unwillingness to Take Risks

"Perhaps the most convincing argument in the favour of centralization is that the subordinate employees commit errors. Senior managers and leaders earnestly believe that they can do better, either because they consider themselves smarter or believe they can coordinate decisions more easily. Unfortunately, in complex situations, this ultimately leads to information overload at upper hierarchical levels: the more information the brain tries to receive, the less the total amount that actually gets through". [Driver and Streufert, 1969]

Delegation of authority engenders apprehension that someone may take a wrong step somewhere or may make a wrong decision. What the leaders usually forget that to err is human. For instance, if a baby is not allowed [by his over-protective mother] to learn how to walk for fear of injury, he would never make a start. Similarly, if subordinates are not permitted to work on some matters where they could make mistakes, they would never develop the requisite confidence. How could the subordinates be developed and groomed for managerial positions if they are not provided chance for that? And, how would an organization meet its future needs for managers and leaders?

Inability of Managers to Accept Inadequacies of Subordinates

Some managers are so perfectionist in their thinking, and their expectations concerning fulfilment of tasks are so high, that their

subordinates are simply unable to achieve such standards. Since these managers cannot accept a less-than-perfect achievement, they do not delegate authority. Sometimes this perfectionist syndrome goes beyond all reasonable limits. While there are certainly some tasks that require flawless functioning, many organizational tasks might be accepted on the basis of some reasonable standards.

Dilemma of Delegation

Henry Mintzberg views delegation as the most significant managerial problem. He argues that while managers tend to delegate tasks involving only one specialist function, they feel cold-footed on the prospects of delegating tasks that cut across specialties or that involve the managers' special information. Since a senior manager is usually in possession of relevant factual and valuable information, he is best suited to handle such tasks himself. But he cannot do everything alone. Some of these tasks have to be delegated. On consequences of retaining and monopolizing the privileged information by the managers, Mintzberg says,

“Hence the manager is damned by his own information system either to a life of overwork to one of frustration. In the first case, he does too many tasks himself or spends too much time disseminating verbal information; in the second case, he must watch as delegated tasks are performed inadequately, according to his standards, by the uninformed. It is altogether common in our organizations to witness subordinates being blamed for performances that indicate simply that they have no direct access to the necessary information and that the manager has not realized the need to disseminate the privileged information he does have.”
[Mintzberg, 1973]

For effective and efficient accomplishment of the delegated tasks, subordinates need much of the managers' regular verbal information. It may be a new idea from a colleague or a gossip of a supplier.

Subordinates look up to their managers not only for pinpointing the goals and values of the organization but also for plans and directions to accomplish them. If a manager is not prepared to provide explicit and consistent guidelines regarding goals and plans, he must accept the haphazard efforts of his ill-informed subordinates.

Aversion of Organizational Environment to Delegation

A prolonged autocratic rule in a society greatly influences the day-to-day operations and culture of its organizations as well. In such culture, corporate leaders usually do not consider their subordinates well-suited and/or properly groomed to participate in decision making processes and other important organizational matters. Thus, the culture of centralized operations is further strengthened. In such environment, it is just not in vogue to decentralize authority and get jobs done. Further, there is no pressure from the society on the managers to decentralize.

Fear of Being Exposed

As mentioned earlier, delegation of authority to lower levels is feared to result in goof-ups here and there. Therefore, many managers prefer to do things personally instead of leaving them to their untrustworthy subordinates. But, if a subordinate, given knowledge and authority, performs better than his manager; the incumbent manager might construe that his seniors or colleagues might view the better performance of his subordinate as manager's inadequacy or incompetence. The end result being that centralization remains the best choice of such managers.

Fear of Misuse of Authority

Leaders also do not delegate authority for their in-built fear that subordinates would misuse it. Although these fears are sometimes well-

founded, they are mostly not based on reliable information, facts, empirical research or data. Interestingly, such fears about misuse of authority are usually voiced by those, who are themselves found misusing their authority.

Fear of Losing Competent Subordinates

Managers do not delegate authority due to their fear that the competent employees would outshine themselves and ultimately would either leave the organization, be picked up by somebody else or be promoted to a higher position. In either case, the manager feels losing a competent helping hand.

Fear of Emptiness

Some managers consider authority as something akin to their personal property, hence inseparable from them or transferable to someone else. They feel void in the managerial positions as well as in their personality, when this authority is decentralized. They feel as if they are left with empty hands after they have delegated authority. For them, a person without authority is nothingness.

Inability to Get it Done through Others

It is usually said that it is easier to do the job personally than get it done through others. Some managers feel simply incapable of getting a job done through subordinates. Such feelings are usually experienced by those managers who are newly promoted to managerial positions. Since they have been carrying out most of their tasks personally, they feel more comfortable the same way. In fact, it becomes their second nature to perform all tasks by themselves instead of taking pains to assign these to their subordinates. In other words, though such people are promoted

to the managerial positions, somehow they could not shed off their blue-collar coverall and take charge as managers.

Discouragement from Senior Leaders

In many instances, while managers might be inclined to delegate some of their tasks along with requisite authority to their subordinates; they are discouraged by their senior leaders to do so. If in spite of such “warnings”, they do delegate and something goes wrong, the concerned delegator often has to listen to such verbal reprimands as, “Didn't I tell you in the first place that your subordinates will goof-up somewhere? Couldn't you do that task yourself? How could you delegate such an important assignment to your juniors?”

Feeling More Confident in Doing the Detailed Work

Some managers feel much more confident when doing detailed and operative work than when performing their managerial functions. Most people have some fear of the unknown and tend to shy away from their managerial duties. Thus, it is understandable that a new manager would feel much more confident doing those things that he or she did successfully in the past. The behaviour is likely to occur if the new manager has initial setbacks in performing the managerial functions. Discouraged managers often attempt to immerse themselves in their old duties. Closely related to this problem is the manager, who wants to do things in the same manner he or she has always done them. In either case, the end result is failure to delegate.

Preconceived Ideas about Certain Employees

Sometimes managers erroneously jump to conclusions about the capabilities of some people. For example, a manager might form a negative opinion about an employee's ability, based on one occurrence.

That occurrence may be very unrepresentative of the employee – or the manager may be unaware of the facts surrounding the circumstances. Yet another possibility is for managers to base their opinion of an employee on second-hand information. Such information may come from other managers, employees, or personal acquaintances, and it may be very inaccurate. Naturally, if a manager believes that an employee lacks ability, he will be reluctant to delegate tasks to such employee.

Desire to Set the Right Example

Most managers want to set a good example for their employees by doing many tasks by themselves. The problem, however, is to decide what a good example is. Some managers think that in order to set a good example, they must be busy or at least look busy-all the time. Such managers hoard work that should be delegated. A similar type of manager is the one, who enjoys being a martyr. An example is the manager who thinks that like the commander of a sinking ship, he or she must always be the last one to leave the office or plant. Such a manager's usual inner dialogue is, "This place would fall apart if I didn't work here." Managers of this kind tend to hoard work and do not delegate it.

Tasks that can't be delegated

The concept of delegation does not exhort managers to delegate all types of jobs to their subordinates; there will always be some tasks, which cannot and should not be delegated to lower levels of management. Following tasks ought to be performed by the manager himself; and should not be delegated to employees:-

- (a) Planning Activities: Planning activities include deciding what objectives to pursue and how to achieve them. These activities

also include the routing and scheduling of people and materials. While it is desirable to actively involve employees in planning process, the manager should retain primary authority and responsibility for above-stated planning activities. Although a manager may, rather should delegate certain parts of the planning process, he or she should retain authority for the coordination and finalization of plans.

- (b) **Assigning Work:** The task of assigning work to employees is a sensitive job and demands managerial authority as well as status of the incumbent; therefore, it should not be delegated to lower level of management. As with planning activities, parts of this process may and probably should be delegated, but the manager should retain overall control of this activity.
- (c) **Motivational Problem:** Creating the proper work environment to enhance employee motivation is the primarily responsibility of the manager. This does not mean that employees do not play a significant part in their own motivation. However, it does imply that the manager will always have a strong influence on the work environment, which in turn affects employee motivation. Thus, if a manager notices some motivational problems among his people, he should tackle such problems himself.
- (d) **Counseling Employees:** The manager normally should not delegate the task of counselling his employees regarding job-related issues; however, when an employee needs personal counselling or technical information that might better be supplied by a specialist, the manager should refer the employee to the proper source.

- (e) **Resolving Conflict Situations:** Whenever a conflict arises between two or more employees, the manager should immediately take charge and provide assistance in resolving the conflict. This, however, does not mean that the manager should order them to resolve the conflict, but that he should ensure that the involved parties resolve it.
- (f) **Tasks Specifically Assigned to the Manager by the Higher Management:** It is generally not a good idea to delegate tasks or assignments that higher management expects the manager to do personally, such as serving on a committee, providing expert opinion on certain matters, coordination with other/outside agencies.

Measures to Facilitate Decentralization

Broadly speaking, there are eleven measures to alleviate the fears and misgivings of managers about delegation of authority. In the following paragraphs, we shall discuss these measures to encourage managers and leaders to delegate appropriate authority to their subordinates and reap its fruits in the form of higher productivity, commitment and motivation.

Create Awareness

So long as a manager attempts to do most of the tasks by himself, he'll always be short of time and dwarf on the scale of achievement. The only way to feel relaxed and still be more productive is to develop people and allow them the freedom of action by assigning them important tasks and delegating appropriate authority to them. Another way of making managers conscious of significance and need for delegation is to send them on some useful management courses where they can learn to

delegate through such techniques as role playing, seminars, problem solving, management games, etc.

Make the Potential Delegator feel Secure

It has been noted that many managers, who resist delegation, are hardworking and competent. The only problem with a non-delegating manager is that he has still not assumed the role of a manager, though occupying the manager's chair. He feels, in a way, insecure in his new job. In order to prepare such people for their future assignments, they should be provided both on-the-job development and off-the-job courses so that they could adjust themselves in their new positions more smoothly.

Determine What to Delegate

Not all tasks can and should be delegated to lower levels of management. A manager should prepare a list of tasks with their relative importance and time / efforts required to accomplish them. It would help him in determining what and how much to delegate. As a general rule, all routine types of jobs should be delegated to subordinates. Similarly, many regular tasks could also be assigned to lower echelons if appropriate resources [i.e. in the form of mature / well-trained subordinates, materials, privileged managerial information, etc.] are available there. The tasks of sensitive nature or of high priority should always be handled by managers themselves. Once being relieved from routine jobs and most of the regular tasks, managers and leaders are expected to perform better and do justice with their managerial and leadership responsibilities.

Choose the Delegatee Wisely

While delegating authority, one must ensure that the delegated authority would be utilized judiciously and effectively, therefore, due care must be given to the selection of the delegate. In most situations, a delegatee should not necessarily be the most experienced one in the organization. A less experienced but comparatively more willing and intelligent subordinate may prove to be a better choice.

Give Assistance to the Delegatee

In many cases, the delegatee requires guidance and assistance of his seniors to perform certain tasks. In case of complex problems, the delegator should help the delegatee in identifying and exploring the possible alternatives to accomplish the assigned tasks. However, delegator should not suggest specific actions or procedures as it would kill, or at least obstruct, initiative and fervour of the employee.

Accept Inadequacies of People

No human is perfect and so are all employees. Managers should be prepared to accept the inadequacies of employees and to help them improve their performance through proper training, development, discussions, etc. instead of holding back authority or punishing them for their inadequacy.

Provide Information

So long as information remains in the natural memory of the manager, its dissemination will be difficult. Elaborate arrangements are, therefore, mandatory for quick and reliable distribution of the required information at right time and to right people in the organization. Regular debriefing sessions in addition to more frequent informal contacts between the

manager and his people will certainly facilitate to create a data bank of important information. There are, however, two reservations to such an open flow of information. First, manager might be reluctant to expose the sensitive / confidential information to all and sundry. Second, information means power and sharing information will imply sharing power, which might not be liked by many managers. The question of sensitivity of certain information could be settled by striking a trade-off between an effective management as result of free flow of information versus the risks of exposure. The second point concerning information as power deserves a brief comment. A senior manager/officer, who tends to monopolize information, should admit that he prefers personal power over organizational effectiveness. Such type of attitude ultimately causes difficulties both for the manager and the organization on the whole.

Provide Favourable Organization Structure and Environment

It would be difficult to convince managers to delegate until organizational policies, structures and overall environment are favourable and call for decentralization. Such provisions can be ensured only by the top management of the organization. Corporate managers and leaders are themselves responsible to create an organization culture that facilitates decentralization and participation of lower levels of management in the organizational decision making process.

Alleviate Fears

Through pertinent management courses, workshops and counselling sessions, managers could be assured that delegation of authority would not harm their position in the organization. They should rather view delegation as an effective management tool to enhance their own

effectiveness, increase their own chances of advancement in the organisation's hierarchy and a means to develop subordinates for future managerial positions.

Link Delegation to Organizational Objectives

Authority should not be delegated in isolation to the organizational goals. The extent of delegation should be based on the type of activities required to accomplish the goals. While some objectives call for more delegation, others may restrict it. Therefore, an effective manager must carefully link the need for delegation of certain assignments with the organizational objectives.

Get Feedback

Delegation of authority does not mean delegation of managerial responsibility too. Since the overall responsibility for the delegated assignments remains with the manager; methods should be devised to keep the manager in picture. The method of delegating should also include the means of timely information to the delegator of the status of the job so that corrective action is taken, if required. The most common means of feedback include periodical inquiry about the work in progress, written reports at prescribed times and conferences to review the progress and plans for the future.

Don't be Afraid of Over-delegating

Many managers don't delegate enough for fear of delegating too much. A general rule in this regard is, "Better over-delegate than not delegating at all". An effective manager would soon find out the wisdom behind this phrase, when he comes to know that the advantages of even over-delegation are much more than its drawbacks.

Give Employees Some Freedom in Deciding How to Implement their Authority

After assigning work along with the requisite authority to employees, some managers keep on pestering them about the delegated tasks. Probably, they do so to help employees in carrying out the delegated tasks or to get timely feedback about the progress. But too much supervision spoils the spirit of delegation and decentralization. Therefore, the general rule to follow is: "Delegate what to do, not how to do it."

Once Delegated, Let the Employee Take Over

There is no dearth of managers, who display their concern over inadequacies of their juniors and keep on providing suggestions to introduce corrective actions. All this meddling in the delegated tasks results in killing the spirit of initiative and job satisfaction of employees. General rule to follow here is: "Don't rush in at the drop of a hat to straighten things out. Before giving assistance, make sure the employee has had a fair chance."

Conclusion

In nearly all types of organisations, authority stems from upper-level managers to lower-level managers or employees to enable them to make decisions and carry out the assigned tasks. It is commonly observed that several managers do not delegate authority to their subordinates due to their in-built fears and insecurities, attraction for power, reluctance to change, pre-conceived ideas about employees and delegation, etc. The tasks, which can't be delegated, include planning activities, assigning work, motivational or counselling issues, etc.

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