

Managing the Skill of Delegation

Anyone who has worked in business has probably at some point been 'managed'! Was it a fulfilling experience? Did you find a mentor and advocate? Perhaps you were managed by someone who delegated on the run or worse still, openly took credit for your work.

The reality is, that many people who become managers do so, not as a result of any demonstrable ability, but rather borne of pure necessity. In our fast moving world, finding appropriately skilled people is becoming increasingly elusive. Opportunities to source someone in-house who already possesses the appropriate management credentials, is I'm sorry to say, in woefully short supply.

The newly appointed manager, untried and untested is unleashed on his/her unsuspecting subordinates and both are left to sketch out the dynamics of their working relationship as best they can, in the vain hope that some positive outcomes will eventually surface.

I've worked with people from a wide range of industries and one prevailing theme that regularly surfaces is an apparent fundamental misunderstanding of a manager's purpose and role, as well as what truly constitutes good management practice. And at the top of the poor management skills list, cropping up time and time again?...ineffective delegation.

Got that? Good!

The first cardinal sin is giving little or no context. To delegate in this way is to disempower people. It also makes goals less visible and potentially creates an atmosphere where team members feel unable to ask clarifying questions either at the time or later down the line.

There's also the small matter of providing worthwhile and ongoing feedback, something often lacking, particularly in the context of praise rather than just criticism. If people aren't provided with a clear understanding of what success looks like, then they won't truly be able to gauge whether they've done a good job. Knowing what's expected and how those expectations can be met is key to promoting greater confidence and belief in an employee's own ability to succeed.

Knowledge and Information Hoarding!

This is either a symptom of insecurity, holding onto information as a power play or micro managing on a 'need to know' basis, unwilling or unable to bring themselves to allow their team to think for themselves. A common outcome of these tactics is a manager's failure to properly cascade communications and help people understand how the overarching goals of an organisation have bearing on their roles. Subjugating people in this way not only generates frustration, but will almost certainly impact negatively on employee engagement.





Not likely...way too much risk!

Then there are the managers who are just plain reluctant to delegate at all! Whatever the underlying motivation, it's likely that staff will construe this as a lack of trust or recognition of their abilities and talents. People not only want to feel valued; they need it! Our sense of self-worth is significantly affected if our working lives are devoid of any acknowledgement or affirmation from those around us. The manager who doesn't recognise this or take time to actively listen to their team(s) will undermine any chance of building effective and productive working relationships.

So We're Good to Go Yeah?

Another mistake is assuming a team's level of experience or skill to be greater than it is. Fundamental to deciding how staff should be deployed day to day and identifying who for example, is ready to be assigned stretch tasks, means taking time to understand people's current skill levels. When such assumptions are made, people will likely be very reluctant to admit to a gap in either their experience or knowledge. Not surprisingly the result can lead to undue stress and probably a protracted, less than successful execution of the task at hand.



I said I needed it next by Tuesday...!

The impatient manager is another red flag to watch for and is destined to undermine an employee's performance and self-esteem. Whatever the pressure, the manager who delegates a task with deadlines, then appropriates the work before their direct report has had a chance to complete it, sends a clear message that they aren't really valued or trusted. From the subordinate's viewpoint this behaviour will more often than not provoke considerable feelings of resentment and even injustice.

Didn't I mention that?

Then there's the issue of failing to provide adequate authorisation when delegating. An omission often made but rarely recognised, it can occur when a manager needs to delegate a task that goes beyond their team member's normal purview; I'm thinking particularly in cases where input and cooperation is required from colleagues usually positioned as contemporaries. Failure to make everyone aware of even a temporary elevation in authority, can undermine an individual's ability to establish credibility and elicit without resistance or sometimes even resentment, the required compliance and cooperation of colleagues.



Wow! Didn't know you knew that!

Managers need to 'know' their people; their capabilities and how to capitalise on them. They should take time to communicate clearly and openly, providing context and setting out clear, obtainable goals.

Of course, delegation is just one aspect of a manager's role. What's evident however, is that even something as seemingly benign as this, if poorly executed, is likely to have a substantially negative impact on employees and by association, the organisation as a whole.

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