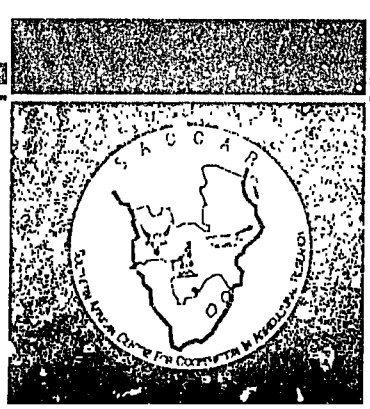
PN-ABG-880

Human Resource Management No. 13

The Practice of Delegation

A. Zinyemba



ISNAR TRAINING SERIES — *Human Resource Management No.* 13

The Practice of Delegation

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October 1990

Southern African Centre For Cooperation In Agricultural Research

International Service for National Agricultural Research

This paper was previously published in the proceedings of the SACCAR / ISNAR Regional Workshop on Human Resource Management in National Agricultural Research Systems (ISNAR 1989).

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Citation:

Zinyemba, A. 1990. The Practice of Delegation. ISNAR Training Series — Human Resource Management No. 13. The Hague: ISNAR.

CABI Descriptors:

Agricultural Research; Management; Managers; Personnel Management; Research Workers; Scientists

AGROVOC Descriptors:

Research; Management; Managers; Scientists

THE PRACTICE OF DELEGATION

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Effective Delegation

Introduction

Rationale. The most successful managers are able to accomplish all the work they are responsible for, as well as some additional responsibilities. One of the ways they do this is to get work done through other people. Successful managers delegate effectively. They do not view delegation as dumping or abdication of authority, but rather as a process of job enrichment. They delegate tasks that can be done more effectively by others, then use their time to focus on the high-priority items that are most critical to their own performance. The ability to delegate effectively is one of the keys to successful management.

Objectives. After completing this unit, participants will be able to do the following:

- explain essential ingredients in effective delegation;
- identify what assignments can and cannot be delegated;
- describe and apply the three steps to be taken when delegating assignments to subordinates;
- identify assignments in their own job situations that can be delegated, and develop a strategy for delegating them to subordinates.

Materials for the Participant

The materials listed below are included in this unit. Supplementary materials may be distributed by the trainer.

- Core material on effective delegation;
- Activity 1 — Signs of nondelegation;
- Activity 2 — Arguments for and against delegation;
- Activity 3 — Self-audit: Are you a good delegator?

Key Points

- A positive attitude about people and their reaction to work is necessary for effective delegation.
- Delegation contributes to the growth and development of subordinates, utilizes their skills and abilities, and frees the manager to manage.
- Effective delegation consists of three steps: (1) assigning responsibility, (2) granting authority, and (3) creating accountability for results.
- The manager who does not delegate accumulates more and more tasks, becomes heavily involved in day-to-day detail, and therefore neglects many of the more important concerns.

It was late Friday afternoon and Tony Carbo, chief of the ministry's planning division, had just finished packing his briefcase in preparation for going home. As he was about to leave the office, Sally Schwenn, head of the agricultural extension office, popped her head in the door to wish Tony a pleasant weekend. Somewhat sarcastically Tony replied, "With all the work I have to do, I will be lucky if I get a chance to sleep." As the conversation continued, Tony complained that there just did not seem to be enough hours in the day. He talked about the constant pressure of the job, how hard it was to find good people, and how no one seemed to want to assume any responsibility. When Sally suggested that maybe some of Tony's problems reflected a lack of adequate delegation, Tony countered with comments like "Subordinates lack experience." "It takes more time to explain than to do the job myself." And, "Experimentation and mistakes can be too costly. Most of my people are specialists and do not have the overall knowledge needed to make the decisions." He repeated the thought that most people are not willing to accept responsibility anyway.

Delegation is one of the manager's most useful tools.

Effective delegation begins with a positive attitude about people and their reaction to work.

Managers with a negative attitude about people and their reaction to work are not likely to practice effective delegation. Rather, they will tend to try to do the following:

- control people and work very closely with them;
- be overly involved in day-to-day details
- make decisions without seeking participation;
- rely on authority, power, pressure, and discipline to get results.

On the other hand, managers whose general attitude about people and their reaction to work is positive will tend to do the following:

- create a climate where subordinates are fully involved in their jobs;
- concentrate on overall goals and objectives;
- gain commitment by involving subordinates in decision making;
- help subordinates achieve results by communicating effectively with them.

A positive attitude about people and their reaction to work is necessary for effective delegation. Managers who are positive in their attitude are able to use delegation as a way of motivating people to their maximum potential. The act of delegating, then, is both a vote of confidence and a growth opportunity for the subordinate.

DELEGATION

Contributes to growth and development of subordinates

Utilizes skills and abilities of subordinates

Frees the manager to manage

The Role of Delegation

Contributing to Growth and Development

Two statements frequently quoted are "people learn by doing" and "experience is the best teacher." Delegation is a key factor in turning these statements into operating principles rather than just clichés. With effective delegation, subordinates have an opportunity to perform and, within broad limits, have freedom to work. As they learn by experience, they should be entrusted with greater responsibility, which may take the form of added or more difficult tasks, increased authority and accountability, or independent decision making. Managers must share responsibility with their subordinates if subordinates are to grow and develop their abilities.

Utilizing Skills and Abilities

Delegation ensures the maximum use of subordinates' skills and abilities. Through delegation, managers can also discover the true capabilities of subordinates. Without delegation, their assessment of subordinates' future potential is based on subjective judgments. Thus, not only does delegation provide the means for managers to make maximum use of their subordinates' skills and abilities, but it is also the only way to determine the extent of those skills and abilities in the first place.

Freeing the Manager to Manage

As soon as people move into a position where they supervise the work of others, their job changes. Their main responsibility is to "get things done through others." In short, they are no longer doers, but instead, they are managers, who must do whatever they can to help their subordinates accomplish maximum results within the limits of their skills and abilities. This means that managers must define jobs in terms of the results to be achieved, work with subordinates in determining the best way to achieve these results, help subordinates identify and overcome problems that hinder this achievement, counsel, coach, give assistance as needed, and give subordinates the opportunity to perform on the job. To the extent that managers do not do these things, they are not delegating, not getting things done through others, and consequently, not managing. There is a limit to what managers can accomplish on their own, and without delegation, the whole operation is confined to this limit. Thus, delegation is one of the main tools managers can use to ensure that they spend their time managing rather than doing.

What Can or Cannot Be Delegated?

Assignments which a manager can delegate include the following:

- Bona fide problems or issues that require exploration, study, analysis, and recommendations for solution;
- Activities beyond day-to-day operations but still within the scope of the subordinate's job and abilities;

- Projects that guide human talent in a positive direction — toward the organization's goals and also toward the employee's continuing development and growth;

- Problems which, if handled well by the subordinate, would conserve the manager's time.

There is no exact prescription for what cannot be delegated. However, managers generally agree on certain tasks that cannot or should not be delegated. These include the following:

- Planning — setting plans within larger goals or objectives;

- Morale problems that are of considerable importance to the work unit;

- Reconciling line and staff conflicts or differences;

- Coaching and training subordinates and reviewing their performance;

- Assignments that have been given specifically to the manager by his/her superior;

- Any part of a committee or task force assignment (especially if the information is confidential) to which the manager gives his/her personal commitment;

- Certain pet projects, ideas, or activities of the manager him/herself, when these do not distract seriously from larger responsibilities;

- Matters on which there just is not enough qualified talent available for delegation — or which involve too much of a risk.

How to delegate

Historically, delegation has proved to be an elusive concept. It has been talked about a great deal but practiced considerably less. One of the problems is that the concept of delegation has been oversimplified. Considerable time and effort have been devoted to developing neat definitions, but in the process, the true meaning of delegation has been lost. Delegation is a total philosophy of how to manage people. Once the elements of this philosophy are fully understood and the manager is personally committed to developing a professional approach to managing, then and only then will delegation be effective.

Whenever mangers delegate, they performs three steps: (1) they assign responsibility, (2) they grant authority, and (3) they create accountability for results.

Step 1. Assigning Responsibility

The assignment of responsibility is the step that has received the greatest emphasis over the years. Most managers can give a clear description of the duties or tasks that their subordinates must perform. Similarly, most employees can give an adequate description of their job in a physical or "doing work" sense. In assigning responsibility, however, managers must go beyond the typical job description. This is only half of what assigning responsibility means. The other half — the important half — is to do the following:

Specify what results are expected after an employee has performed the work.

It is this latter half that managers often neglect.

Essentially, it is a question of what people are paid to do. Is it to work a given number of hours and during that time to perform certain tasks? Or, is it to achieve specified results as a culmination of having performed these tasks? The latter is much more logical. Accordingly, managers of a grain storage cooperative are more than day-to-day administrators of the storage operation. Their responsibilities should include keeping losses to a specified minimum, establishing the most economical work flow and equipment utilization, scheduling grain deliveries and pickups to maintain maximum usage of storage space, and the like. In terms of results to be achieved, the assigned responsibilities might include analyzing the quality and capacity of the storage facilities, determining the causes of problems, developing actions to resolve problems, and presenting recommendations for improvements to the board of directors of the cooperative.

The "assignment-of-responsibility" step of delegation is not quite as simple as it might appear and goes beyond what is done by many managers. Managers and their subordinates, must have a clear understanding and agreement about the following items:

1. The activities or tasks the subordinate is responsible for performing;

2. The areas of the job where they are responsible or accountable for achieving results;

3. The specific results they are accountable for achieving in each area;

4. How performance in each area of accountability will be measured.

Step 2. Granting Authority

The second step in delegating has also been limited in its interpretation. This step involves more than simply telling subordinates to go ahead and do whatever they think should be done or telling them to "make whatever decisions must be made." A manager cannot grant authority without at the same time incurring managerial and leadership responsibilities.

The process of granting authority can be divided into two phases: a preliminary phase and a continuing support phase. During the preliminary phase, the manager and subordinate should reach an agreement about the results expected. The manager should then do the following:

1. Ask the subordinate to present ideas and plans for achieving the desired results.

2. By raising questions, suggest possible alternatives and help the subordinate to explore all aspects of the situation.

3. Prompt the subordinate to think about and identify potential problems and how to overcome them if they appear.

4. Agree on the course of action to be followed.

The continuing support phase of granting authority can be summed up as follows:

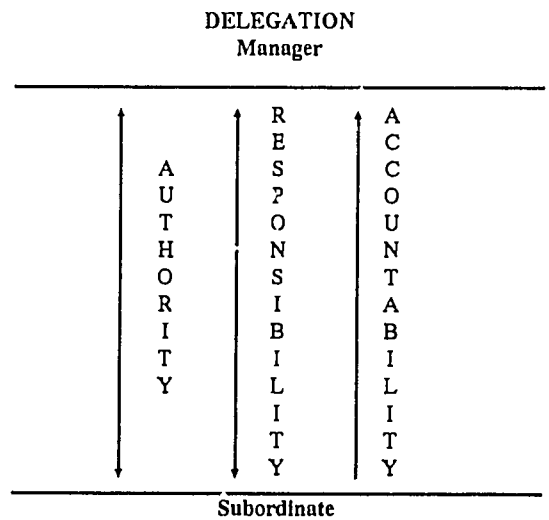
> Managers have responsibility downward to their subordinates. They make sure their subordinates know and understand what is demanded of them. Then they help their subordinates reach these objectives. Managers are responsible for getting the tools, the staff, and the information they need. They help their subordinates with advice and counsel. And, if necessary, they teach them to do better.

Thus, the granting of authority is not a "you-are-on-your-own" situation. Neither is it a one-way situation where the manager explains what is to be done, when it is to be done, how it is to be done, who is to do it, and single-handedly makes all the decisions in between. Instead, it is a blending of two factors: a subordinate's skills, abilities, knowledge, and potential to contribute, and a manager's guidance, counsel, and help.

Step 3. Creating Accountability

Accountability is the end product of delegation. Accountability is not something that subordinates can accept or reject as they choose. When all the ingredients of effective delegation are present, then the recipients of the delegated responsibility and authority must be held accountable for the results (good or bad) of their activities.

In theory, the subordinate's acceptance of accountability should be a semiautomatic process that logically flows from and is part of the total delegation process. In practice, however, this acceptance is not always present. In fact, a subordinate may resist being held accountable for results. When this happens, there are two possible explanations. First, the manager can simply assume that a subordinate has a negative attitude. In that case, the response is to replace the individual, threaten punishment, withhold rewards, or exert pressure through close control and exercise of authority. Second, the manager can consider the possibility that something is missing completely or only partially present in the work climate. This is a much more constructive approach.



What Delegation Is Not

In order to remove some common misconceptions about delegation, it may be helpful to briefly examine what delegation is not and why attempts at delegation may fail.

Dumping

First of all, delegation is *not* "dumping." It is not giving someone a job to do and just telling them to do it. When this approach is taken, the results a manager expects are seldom achieved. Receivers of this type of delegation must justify why what was expected did not happen, when in fact they were not given any indication of what was expected. In a climate such as this, subordinates will avoid any attempt by the manager to delegate responsibility. As pointed out earlier, delegation must also include a statement of the results expected, and then, during the performance period, a manager must provide support, coaching, and help, if needed.

Also to be effective, the responsibilities delegated must be meaningful to subordinates. They must know why the results are important and what their contributions mean to the overall effort. Above all, they must receive feedback upon successful completion of the tasks.

Abdication of authority

Second, delegation is *not* abdication of authority. When managers delegate, they set certain parameters within which subordinates are expected to operate. These parameters may limit the type and magnitude of decisions subordinates can make without first clearing them with the manager. The parameters may also permit subordinates to operate only within the limits of certain policies and procedures. It is important to point out, however, that if every decision must be cleared, there is no delegation. Similarly, if subordinates must defend every decision or action, they will soon be unwilling to do anything without first checking and getting approval.

Policies and procedures should facilitate the accomplishment of results, not hinder them. Nothing will destroy delegation and the willingness to accept it more quickly than being crippled by unnecessary rules and regulations. Managers can greatly increase the effectiveness of their delegation by making sure that the climate in which subordinates operate is one which helps them to achieve. Although limits on delegation can be important, the limits must not be carried to extremes.

Loss of control

Third, delegation does *not* mean that the manager loses control. When delegation occurs, various checks should be established. When and where these checkpoints occur is based on the manager's knowledge and experience of the situation. In any operation or project, there are usually certain critical stages. If results are on target at each of these stages, we can be reasonably be sure that the final results will meet the goal. By indentifying these critical points and reviewing progress at each one, the manager can maintain control.

Avoiding decisions

Finally, delegation is *not* avoiding decisions. Managers who delegate still make decisions. The important point is that they can concentrate their efforts on the most important decisions and allow their subordinates to make those decisions that are best made at the point of direct contact. In doing this, managesr avoid day-to-day detail, take maximum advantage of skills, and give greater support. Some types of questions that require a manager's decision-making function include the following: What results are desired? What problems may arise in achieving these results? How can these results best be achieved? Which tasks should be delegated and to whom? When should progress be reviewed? When should results be achieved?

Why Managers Do Not Always Delegate

While the reasons frequently given for not delegating may appear to be valid, further analysis reveals some serious weaknesses in logic and some long-range negative repercussions.

The first reason a manager may give for not delegating is that "delegating takes more time than doing it myself." This may be true in the short run, but not in the long run. Managers who do not delegate accumulate more and more tasks and become heavily involved in day-to-day detail. Since their time and energy are limited, they will eventually reach a point where "something has to give." When this point is reached, some things will be delayed while others will go completely undone. As the pile grows larger, these managers are more likely to be faced with emergencies and to direct their efforts toward crisis situations. They will become fire fighters, and many of the more important concerns that should occupy their time and attention will be neglected. At the same time, their subordinates will begin to lose interest in their jobs.

Managers may also claim that they cannot delegate because their subordinates lack experience. However, the only way subordinates can get the necessary experience and grow and develop in their jobs is to learn by doing. Without delegation, the process of learning by doing cannot take place. This, of course, leads to an underutilization of skills and abilities. If subordinates are not given opportunities to perform, they may eventually decide to leave and seek employment elsewhere. Their only way to deal with this is to provide opportunities for responsible work assignments that "stretch" the individual and at the same time provide necessary training and guidance.

Another argument a manager may use against delegation is that "mistakes are too costly." Delegation does not mean that the manager loses control. Rather, two essential features of effective delegation are (1) managers interact with their subordinates in planning how desired results can best be achieved and (2) various checkpoints along the way are established to review progress. If these two steps are taken, costly and serious mistakes can be substantially, if not completely, eliminated. This does not mean that subordinates will always approach an assignment exactly the way their superior does. Indeed, they may find a better way. If managers interpret mistakes to mean that theirs is the only way, then they will have other more serious problems in the long run.

Another reason managers may give for not delegating is "subordinates are specialists without the necessary overall knowledge required to make many decisions." However, it

is the manager's job to coach and develop subordinates on a continuous basis. Managers must broaden their subordinates' perspectives, knowledge, insight, and overall understanding as they progress on the job. This can best be accomplished by a specific development program for each employee. In this way, managers can be assured that their people will gradually receive the background they need in order to accomplish delegated assignments.

Managers may be reluctant to delegate because they are afraid that a subordinate "will perform so well that they might replace the manager." For good managers, such fears are totally unfounded. Managers' performance is a reflection of their subordinates' performance. If the subordinates "look good," the manager "looks good"; if the subordinates "look bad," the manager "looks bad."

A final reason managers may not delegate is that they find it difficult to justify to themselves and others the time they spend planning. Many were taught to believe that being creative may look as if they are not busy and subject them to criticism from others.

Why Subordinates Do Not Always Accept Delegation

The reasons subordinates do not always accept delegation are primarily associated with fear. Most significant is the fear of failure, and this can be caused by lack of self-confidence. It does not really make much difference why subordinates lack self-confidence, the important point is that they do. When this is true, managers must delegate in such a way as to stimulate confidence and thus acceptance. Specifically, they must clearly indicate that they will be available to help if needed and the type of support that they will provide. In addition, they may want to spend more time working with subordinates in planning "how" to proceed as well as establishing more frequent formal review times for evaluating the progress of the delegation.

Fear of failure can also be a result of the way mistakes have been handled in the past. To establish a set of circumstances that would completely eliminate the possibility of all mistakes would also defeat delegation. Thus, some mistakes are bound to occur. The critical issue is how mistakes are handled when they occur. More specifically, does the manager use them constructively as a learning experience for subordinates or is the emphasis on the mistake itself? If the latter is true and occurs too often, subordinates will be conditioned to resist further delegation.

Resistance to delegation may also occur if subordinates are overloaded with work and if, in addition, there is confusion resulting from poor organization. When this condition exists, there is usually an overall hectic atmosphere that tends to discourage anything more than minimal development.

Subordinates may be reluctant to accept delegation if the task is not challenging, or if it is routine or uninteresting. It is also possible that the relationship between the manager and the subordinate may be one of suspicion rather than trust. The subordinate may not accept the authority of the manager.

Effective Delegation

In summary, the primary function of managers is to preside over the process of delegation. This requires all of their judgment and much of their time. Effective managers are constantly trying to provide, through delegation, the opportunities for growth that their subordinates demand. The strength of any organization increases when its employees at all levels are able to accept responsibility. The assignment of responsibility should never be static, but should change with the situation and with the increasing capacity of the employees. When good managers delegate responsibility to subordinates and train them to discharge their responsibilities well, the managers themselves are developing their skills as managers as well as increasing the satisfaction and ability of their subordinates.

Activity 1
Signs of Nondelegation

Inadequate delegation in an organization will reveal itself even if for a time the organization seems to be operating adequately. Various symptoms become apparent in an organization if delegation to subordinates is meager. These signs are evident when

"Putting out fires" or handling "crisis situations" becomes a pattern.

Things tend to slow down, even come to a standstill, when the manager is away.

Bottlenecks exists and nobody seems to get to the task of removing them.

Deadlines are often missed.

Inequitable workloads develop between two levels of management, with one level quite overworked and the other somewhat underworked.

A backlog of good ideas accumulates but is never pursued.

Management objectives and goals receive very little interest.

A very casual attitude develops toward making mistakes.

Key managers are unduly preoccupied with details — there is too much detail for its own sake rather then for use in confirmation

Decision making is slow, with too much authority clustered at the upper levels.

Managerial time is used poorly.

There is limited interest in managerial succession or preparedness for promotions and transfers to positions of higher responsibility.

Line and staff misunderstandings remain unresolved.

Committees and task forces are used excessively to resolve problems.

Do you agree that the above are symptoms of nondelegation?

Do any of these symptoms exist in your organization?

Are they caused by inadequate delegation or are there other causes?

What specific actions would you propose to eliminate the symptoms?

Activity 2
Arguments for and against Delegation

Imagine a debate between two managers. Manager *A* takes a more traditional point of view and tends to be skeptical of the value of broad delegation of responsibility. Manager *B* feels that delegation is the most effective and subtle tool at a manager's disposal. Each manager has chosen an extreme position, Manager *A* against delegation and Manager *B* in favor of broad delegation. Manager *A*'s argument is summarized on the left in four points. By drawing a line, match each of Manager *A*'s points with Manager *B*'s corresponding rebuttal (as has already been done with Manager *A*'s first point). An opinion may be rebutted more than once, but all rebuttals must be used.

MANAGER *A*	MANAGER *B*
"Delegation takes more time than doing it myself."	"The only way a subordinate can get the necessary experience is by doing."
"Mistakes are too costly."	"Without delegation, learning cannot take place and employee dissatisfaction becomes a problem."
"Subordinates often lack experience."	"Managerial control can be maintained by periodic reviews at critical points."
"Subordinates often are specialists without the necessary overall knowledge required to make decisions."	"For the sake of organizational stability, a manager should develop a timetable for the training of each employee."
	"A manager who does not delegate becomes overwhelmed by day-to-day details, to the detriment of everyone."

Activity 3
Self Audit: Are You a Good Delegator?

Think about the way you function as a manager and answer the following questions.

1. Do you have to take work home quite often?

   Yes No

   Why?

2. Do you work longer hours than those you supervise or than is usual for people working in your type of organization?

   Yes No

3. Do you have little time for appointments, recreation, study, civic work, and the like?

   Yes No

4. Do you need more phones and/or secretarial assistance than before?

   Yes No

5. Are you frequently interrupted because others come to you with questions or for advice?

   Yes No

6. Do you spend some of your working time doing things for others that they could do themselves?

   Yes No

7. Do you have unfinished jobs accumulating or difficulty meeting deadlines?

   Yes No

8. Do you spend more of your time working on details than on planning and supervision?

   Yes No

   Why?

9. Are you inclined to closely watch everything that is going on?

   Yes No

10. Do you lack confidence in your workers' abilities to the extent that you are afraid to risk letting them take over more details?

    Yes No

11. Are you too conscientious (a perfectionist) about details that are not important for the main objectives of your position?

    Yes No

12. Do you believe that executives should be rushed in order to justify their salary?

Yes No

Why?

13. Do you hesitate to admit that you need help to keep on top of your job?

Yes No

What are some examples of help you could use?

14. Do you neglect to ask workers for their ideas about problems that arise in their work?

Yes No

15. At the staff meetings you convene, do you find that the same items on the agenda tend to be repeated because not much action has been taken on them?

Yes No

Why do you think this happens?

16. Do you find after you are ill, on vacation, or away from the office for a few days (travel, attendance at a conference, visiting a field plant, etc.), your in-basket is quite full upon your return?

Yes No

What do you think the reasons for this are?

From the self-audit, identify three of the most critical problems that you have.

1.

2.

3.

Now, look at your particular work situation and identify some of the areas where you may be able to delegate more effectively. Begin by completing the following Delegation Analysis Sheet.

DELEGATION ANALYSIS			
What I Do	Why I Do It	Can a Subordinate Do It?	Can a Subordinate Be Trained to Do It?

Delegation Strategies

Do you feel you are delegating well enough?

Was it difficult to identify any employees who could do some of your work for you?

Review your Delegation Analysis Sheet and list those things you do that could be delegated to one of your subordinates.

Develop a strategy for delegating at least three of these responsibilities. The plan should include the following:

What you will delegate.

Who you will delegate it to.

When you will start to delegate it.

How you will delegate it.

How you will keep in contact with the subordinate concerning the delegated responsibility.

Why Supervisors Do Not Delegate

1. Power — people become dependent on the supervisor.
2. Fear that subordinates will learn too much about their techniques.
3. Fear of subordinate failure even if they wish to delegate.
4. Lack of trust.
5. Fear to lose control over their department/section.
6. Jealousy — they want to take all the credit and therefore do not involve subordinates.
7. Lack of role clarity. They do not know which tasks and duties can/should be delegated.

Why Delegate?

1. To develop and groom subordinates.
2. It is a good management technique.
3. Time management — Time saver.

What to Do

Step 1 Supervisors should analyse their own jobs to ascertain major tasks and duties. Know what to delegate.

Step 2 Supervisors should monitor critical activities most carefully.

Step 3 Determine the degree of delegation.

Step 4 Follow-up.

Determining the Degree of Delegation

1. Authority is retained by the supervisor.
2. Subordinate can act after the supervisor's approval.
3. Subordinate acts and then reports to the supervisor.
4. Complete authority is delegated to the subordinate.

NB:

1. Supervisor still has the responsibility for the actions of the subordinate.
2. Type of delegation should not be considered as fixed and static. There can be progression, as in phased delegation.

Critical Activities: Those activities that must be completed if the organization is to accomplish its basic goals, e.g., ordering supplies, paying checks, etc.

Needed Activities: Those activities that should be performed if the section is to operate efficiently, e.g., inservice training in the use of new equipment.

Peripheral Activities: Activities not directly related to major goals, e.g., fund raising, organizing picnics.

Overall Activities for Delegation

Activity	Nature	Importance	Degree of Delegation	Development Potential for Subordinate
Daily inventory	Routine	Critical	Act and report daily	Moderate
Performance appraisals	Nonroutine	Needed	Retain	Not applicable
Work scheduling	Both	Critical	Act after approval	Moderate
Flower fund	Nonroutine	Peripheral	Complete authority	Low
Prepare monthly budget	Nonroutine	Needed	Act after approval	High
Process grievances	Nonroutine	Critical	Retain	Not applicable
Conversations with boss	Both	Needed	Retain	High
Salary committee	Nonroutine	Peripheral	Unsure	High