

Business Bullet ~ Delegate Effectively

The “D” in leadership stands for Delegating. Delegating will challenge your skills in communicating, listening, planning, decision making, and problem solving. It will teach you to build rapport and create productive relationships.

Reverting to our childhood for a moment, do you remember the Little Red Hen? She wanted to bake some bread. She asked some friends to help with various tasks, such as harvesting the wheat, taking it to the gristmill, gathering the ingredients, and making the dough. All her friends refused. The Little Red Hen replied, “Then I will do it myself.” On the day when the delicious smell of freshly baked bread wafted out of the Little Red Hen’s kitchen, her friends arrived and asked for some. The Little Red Hen flatly refused to share her bread, of course.

Although we can admire the Little Red Hen for her industriousness, we can also wonder why her attempts at delegation and teamwork failed. The Little Red Hen wasn’t a leader. She didn’t know how to create a team or share her vision.

For business owners and managers, delegation is an essential skill, and a leadership responsibility. The hazards of doing everything yourself can include burnout and missed deadlines. You may get stretched too thin, or find that you don’t have all the skills needed for the job. That’s when it’s time to delegate.

Delegating multiplies your effectiveness, so you can use your time and talents where they make a difference. Besides streamlining your work and saving time, delegating teaches you to communicate persuasively, supervise and train, and expand your sphere of influence. It means building and maintaining a team. In the long run, delegating may help you make even more ‘bread’!

How do you get people to share the work and take on extra projects? How do you get people to share your vision and goals? How do you delegate?

Right now, you may be thinking, “Look, I pay people to do their jobs — so all I have to do is tell them what to do and they will do it.” People want more than a salary. They want job satisfaction. Job satisfaction is especially important in small businesses where the ‘staff’ may be family members, volunteers, part-timers, and employees who wear multiple ‘hats,’ and where the compensation may not be luxurious.

You can help your staff stretch their talents, and grow through teamwork, new skills, and problem solving. Delegating gives more people a stake in the outcome. Delegation is more than hiring and managing people — it is guiding, inspiring, and motivating them. Here are six steps for doing it well.

1. Select people for the job, and motivate them.

Define the scope of the work based on the outcomes, products, and deliverables. Break out the tasks or steps that will accomplish the work. Decide on project milestones and define realistic completion dates for each one. Then, delineate the steps for each task and decide the skill sets that are needed.

Next, identify the people for each task. Look for dependability and motivation as well as skill. The way you present a task can bolster someone’s willingness to participate, or to stretch beyond their comfort zone, and follow through. When you delegate a new job to someone, convey enthusiasm and emphasize the importance of the project in a positive manner. Describe the task to people in ways that appeal to their needs and values.

Abraham Maslow, the father of humanistic psychology, defined basic human needs (in hierarchical order) as survival, security, love and belonging, self-esteem, achievement and mastery, and self-actualization. People are motivated when an assignment matches their priority needs. For example, to appeal to the need for belonging, say “We want you on our team.” For self-esteem, say, “Your unique talents will make this project a success.” For achievement, say “I’m asking you to stretch your comfort zone and succeed at something you never thought you could do.”

Self-actualization is the highest human need. With self-actualization, people are maximizing their potential and enhancing their self-concept. Self-concepts are based on values. Your values define who you think you are, what you believe in, your attitudes, and the things you like to do. To motivate a person at the level of self-actualization, appeal to their highest values.

2. Match the person to the task.

You compliment people when you ask them to take on a task that matches or expands their skills. People enjoy showing off what they know. To make the match, get to know people. Find out about their experience, education, hobbies, and training.

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If you are organizing a team or committee, make sure the members have a good mix of talents and strengths. Some people work well with little supervision, while some expect routine guidance. Some like working with technical details, while others like working with global concepts. Some excel in the limelight, while some work well behind the scenes. Structure your group with diversity and balance.

3. Define project tasks and communicate them clearly.

Clearly communicate to each team member the purpose of the project, his or her responsibilities, and the schedule. Specify and quantify what you expect for the final outcome and/or interim products. Example, "We need 100 copies of an eight-page report by September 1." Give people outlines, checklists, and diagrams.

Explain how each task dovetails with, or supports, or is contingent on other tasks. Provide access to or direct people to relevant reference materials such as training manuals, users' guides and workbooks. Ask questions to make sure they understand the task. Give every person your phone number and email and make yourself available to answer questions and provide guidance and clarification.

4. Track progress, give feedback, and help people solve problems.

Check in periodically and ask your team about their progress. Are they on schedule? Do they have the resources they need? Have they run up against any unforeseen obstacles? Do they still understand the requirements? Monitor the work and give feedback in a positive, helpful way.

When you check on progress, ask open-ended questions such as "How are you coming along on the brochures?" or, "What are you working on now and what have you accomplished since we last talked?" Provide sincere praise and positive reinforcement for all efforts.

If the work is behind schedule, or the finished products are flawed, maintain a helpful, open attitude. Explore with team members how improvements could be made. Ask what additional help or resources they need. Help them brainstorm new approaches. You may want to restructure work assignments, or assign a mentor to an employee who isn't learning quickly. You may need to bring in a specialist or negotiate with the customer for a later delivery date.

5. Allow for creativity and variations in work style.

Keep your focus on the final result/products, not on the details of how the job gets done. People work according to individual learning styles and preferences. When you let them work in their preferred ways, they feel ownership for the effort. While some people like to work piece-meal, some like to work through continuous effort. Some people can multi-task, and some like to work on one thing at a time. Some need more structure and supervision than others. Those on your team may not perform the task exactly as you would. If you have selected skilled, talented people, they will probably do the job better than you would have and you may be pleasantly surprised with the results.

6. Provide incentives and show appreciation.

Let people know there is a pay-off in working for you, and develop a reputation as someone who rewards good work. Pay increases, bonuses, stock options, and promotions are significant incentives for getting people to go the extra mile. You can give other rewards too, such as time off, a letter of appreciation in the personnel file, special mention in the corporate or industry newsletter, an award, a gift, or an invitation to a special corporate/industry event for insiders only. You can recognize the team or individuals at a corporate meeting, or plan a special luncheon for them at corporate expense. Throw a party for them at project completion. Send personal notes of thanks and say "Thank you for a job well done."

So, next time you want to make some extra 'bread', don't be like the Little Red Hen. Do more than just ask. Appeal to people's competencies and values, give them guidance and feedback, and give them a stake in the outcome. Only a chicken laments "I have to do everything myself!"

