

Improving Your Delegation

by Kelly S. Petrock

Content, concepts and capabilities addressed in this article are covered in our latest leadership development offering “Leadership Skill & Style Development” (LSSD). Additionally, this material can be transferred to clients via workshops, coaching and tele-classes.

At the start up of each Leadership Skill & Style Development (LSSD) workshop we give participants an opportunity to list the three leadership skills they most want to hone and develop. Participants also list three skills of which they feel they already have some mastery. They are then challenged to get up and mingle, discuss their lists and ultimately get signatures from other participants who have areas of mastery that match their areas for development. Only once each person has their three signatures can they sit back down. In this way they get acquainted, get connected and get to know each other.

Having participants match their needs and skills with each other is our way of creating and reinforcing a learning community, one where we all can feel free to take on the roles of both coaches and learners. Here is the short list of developmental needs that frequently emerge:

- To become a better “Delegator”.
- To better Motivate performers.
- To conduct more effective Meetings.
- To become a better Listener.
- To develop more Patience.
- To manage Time better.

Delegation is always a major need and concern of participants. Effective delegation requires leaders to first test their thinking and mental model for delegation before they test or develop their skills. To do this leaders have to come to grips with what the term “delegate” means to them.



Kelly Petrock is President of the General Systems Consulting Group and works with organizations to design and implement leadership and team training solutions as well as large-scale organizational change. His clients include AutoLiv, Nuclear Power Facilities, McDermott & BWXT, Motorola, Pall AeroPower, Maryland World Class Manufacturing Consortium, American Express, BWXT, Holcim, Ford Motor Company and General Dynamics. He can be reached at ksprock@aol.com.

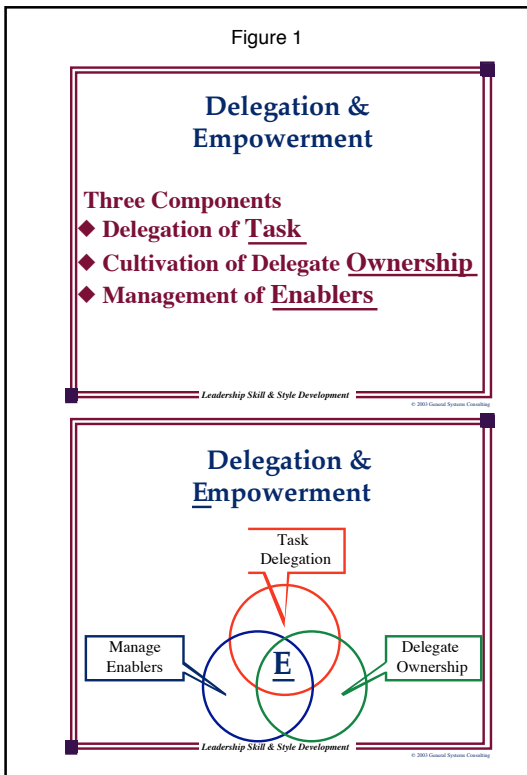
To delegate is of course a verb: to give a task or assignment to another person to carry out. Leaders, for the most part, are prone to action and tend to understand the verb meaning of delegate.

Delegate is also a noun. As such, delegation is a leadership decision to select or appoint someone who will act or decide on your behalf. This definition

is less “action” focused and more “other” focused. In this way delegation assumes a high degree of performer maturity; someone who is both highly *capable* and psychologically *willing*. These are not the performers to give SLJ’s (simply little jobs) to do. Delegation is for your “A” players, your emissaries, your delegates.

Leaders want their delegates to “take the ball and run with it”. They also want them to be independent actors, to be proactive and when faced with two less than optimal choices, choose the one that is least worse (triage). In most cases we desire not only to delegate, but to empower the delegate to fully act and decide on our behalf. Enabling this empowered form of delegation requires that three distinct and essential elements of the delegation process be managed effectively.

Figure 1. below outlines the three essential elements required to achieve this type of empowered delegation.



These are: Delegation of the TASK, Cultivation of Delegate OWNERSHIP and management of ENABLERS.

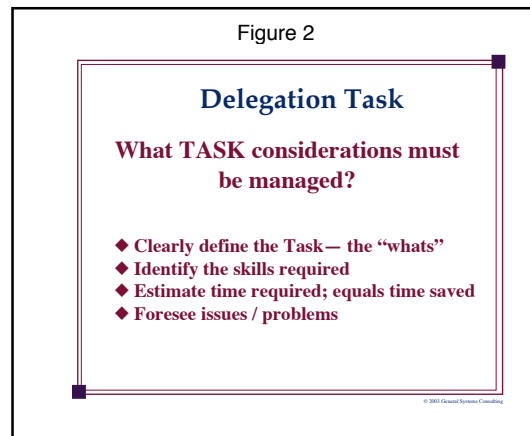
Typically leaders only really “see” and therefore attend to one or two of these elements. As a results, many leaders tend develop a delegation “blind-spot.

The information that follows was developed by LSSD participants as they applied the three components of Delegation and Empowerment to their work experiences. LSSD Participants worked to identify typical failure modes of delegation as well as strategies for avoiding these pit falls.

Please use this information to check, trouble shoot and to improve the effectiveness of your delegation.

Delegation of the Task

Figure 2. identifies a few of the important Task considerations for delegation.



Task Delegation Failure Modes: What are the potential failure modes that may occur when the TASK considerations of delegation are not attended to effectively?

- Delegate misses deadlines
- Task does not get done or stalls

- Final task deliverable is done incorrectly or of poor quality
- Results in corrective feedback to the delegate, perhaps compromising their future willingness, increasing resistance and lowering their motivation
- Delegate becomes stressed or frustrated
- Delegate loses trust or respect in the eyes of peers and colleagues
- Delegate may procrastinate or be reluctant to start or finish assignment for fear of being “incorrect”

Review the list above. Do any of these sound familiar or occur when you delegate? Check or highlight those that do.

The list of effective delegation of Task Strategies below represents the thoughts of LSSD participants. Review this list and determine if one or two of these strategies would help improve your own Task delegation.

Delegation of TASK Strategies: What must be done to ensure that the Task considerations of delegation are attended to effectively?

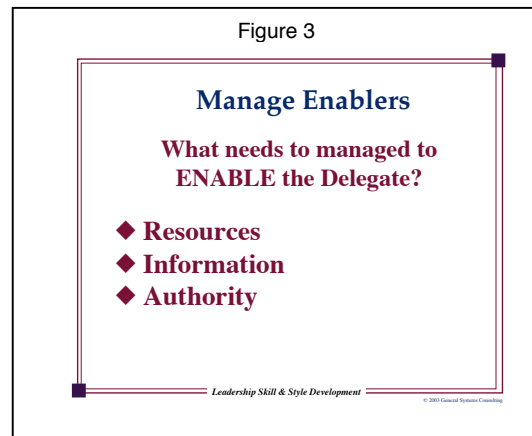
- Engage in a two-way dialogue that ensures that you and the delegate comfortably share an understanding of the situation/context as well as the basic intent or outcome of the issue to be delegated.
- Be sure that clear milestones, objectives, budget parameters, etc. have been identified for the issue to be delegated.
- You and the delegate should discuss and contract what the feedback and monitoring process / cycle should look like; what will be reviewed, the frequency, your roles, etc.

- Ensure that you and the delegate discuss and are comfortable with their skill-task match.
- Ensure that you and the delegate discuss and are comfortable with the workload match.
- If you’ve chosen your delegate wisely, he/she will initiate and own at least fifty percent of this discussion.

Earlier you selected a failure mode that you experience when delegating. Which of the above activities will best help avoid the failure modes you checked earlier?

Management of Enablers

Figure 3. outlines a few critical delegation enablers that need to be attended to.



Failure Modes: What can go wrong when critical Enablers for delegation are not attended to effectively?

- Deliverables are late or behind schedule
- De-motivator
- The delegate will appear and or experience apprehension and frustration
- The delegate may take short-cuts and increase the level of risk associated with the assignment

- Alternative solutions may not be considered and opportunities may be missed
- Resources may be used inefficiently
- Delegates could simply give up and stop working the issue
- The delegate may overstep their boundaries or not extend their reach far enough
- Other members within the organization may complain or resent the efforts of the delegate
- The delegate may strain or disrupt relationships in the organization

Do your delegation efforts “suffer” from any of these failure modes? In the next list of Enabler Strategies see if you cannot find actions that you can take to avoid the pitfalls you just identified above.

Strategies for Managing Delegation Enablers:

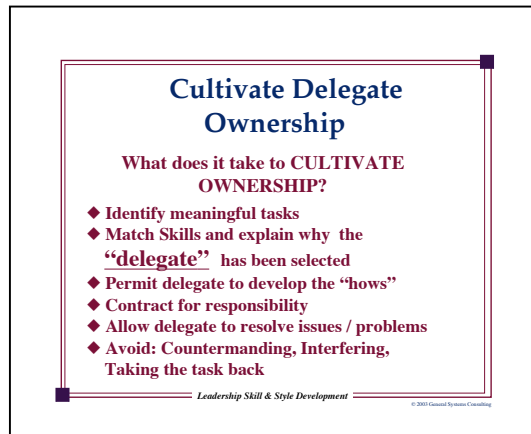
What must be done to ensure that the Enabling considerations of delegation are attended to effectively?

- Provide the tools (databases, computers, processes, etc.) for effective execution
- Discuss authority with your delegate, develop strategies to extend the necessary authority to the delegate and work together to foresee how and when authority may become an issue during the course of the “project”
- Discuss and clarify information sources that can be made available to the delegate
- Discuss the delegates willingness or concerns regarding any new levels of authority associated with the “project”
- Discuss, identify and formalize channels of communication between you and the delegate
- Back your delegate up, don’t let them swing out there alone
- Ensure task delegation & ownership

- Formally communicate to your boss and peers the level of authority that has been vested in the delegate
- Discuss and align the resources requirements associated with the “project”

Cultivation of Ownership

Figure 4. outlines important elements in Cultivating Delegate Ownership.



What can go wrong when delegate ownership is not cultivated?

- Your task can get lost in the shuffle of the delegates other activities
- When representing your needs (in meetings/teams), the delegate may cave in prematurely and not represent your interests as strongly as you would have wished
- Delegate may engage in “blame-storming” and finger pointing when small problems or issues occur
- Delegate may not take a proactive stance on the “project”
- Delegate may stop working on the “project” all together
- Deadlines may slip or not be taken seriously
- Delegate may reverse delegate, pushing actions and requirements back to you
- Work quality may suffer or not be taken seriously

Strategies for Cultivating Delegate Ownership: What must be done to ensure that delegate Ownership has been Cultivated effectively?

- Back up your delegate, support and defend them
- Ensure that you and the delegate discuss why the “project” is important as well as the purpose of the “project”
- Clearly articulate why you have selected the delegate. Make a strong connection between the delegate and the task
- Provide the delegate with history, context and background
- Exhibit trust in delegate. Don’t interfere or meddle
- Let the delegate develop the plan or the approach and ask how you can support that plan / approach
- If possible link the “project” to the delegates overall professional development
- Ask the delegate to define how you and he/she will report and status this project.

What to Look For When Delegating

The effective delegation process should have a certain look and feel to it. Remember, a delegate is someone who possesses a high degree of capability combined with a high degree of willingness. During the delegation process, the delegate should really be more active in ensuring that the Task, Enabling and Ownership elements are attended to. You should observe the

delegate asking questions such as “Why did you select me for this assignment?”, “How should we status each other on progress?”, “What needs to be done to ensure I’m recognized as the “leader” of this activity by my peers and superiors?”.

The more your delegate initiates discussions on the Task, Enabling and Ownership issues, the more confident you can be that you’ve selected the right person. It is fine if you have to ask many of these questions and prompt the discussions. In this case you should be evaluating how quickly and easily your delegate comes up with suggestions and ideas.

Summary

Effective delegation often requires us first to challenge our thinking, our mental model; from delegation as simply a verb to delegation as a noun. Our delegates should be people who can act and decide on our behalf, people who are highly capable and willing.

Delegating effectively also means attending to three important elements; Delegation of the Task, Management of Enablers and the Cultivation of Ownership.

From this article I hope that you have been able to isolate delegation failure modes that you tend to experience as well as ideas for how to prevent them from occurring in the future.