SYNOPSIS

managéris

Principles of effective delegation

Knowing when to delegate is an essential performance factor. Indeed, the advantages of effective delegation are numerous. Delegation enables managers to both free up time to devote to other tasks and reinforce employees' ability to provide essential support. Delegation gives employees an opportunity to acquire new knowledge, prove their worth, and be better recognized for their abilities. The entire team also functions better, because less attention is focused on the manager, thus empowering each individual on the team as well as fostering collaboration among different members and across the organization.

> Delegation is at the very core of managerial efficacy.

Yet, these benefits are far from automatic. Who has never worked with a subordinate unable to assume entrusted responsibilities, or lacking the motivation to devote the required energy? Conversely, how many managers believe they are delegating while intervening at every turn, reducing the real autonomy of their subordinates to next to nothing?

In fact, several factors make delegation a delicate art.

The dilemma between control and the expectation of initiative

Delegation is not just another way of asking subordinates to take over specific tasks; it also gives them responsibility for designing at least part of the solution. This won't work unless managers accept to relinquish some degree of control and give a freer hand to subordinates to propose their own solutions. This is what Gary Hamel in *The Future of Management* describes as what could be calles the "rationale of less," e.g., less orders, less coordination, less verification, in order to foster more individual creativity and initiative. However, for most managers, this rationale seems rather naïve. How can one ensure efficiency without rules? How can one ensure that everyone is moving in the same direction if each person is free to do things his or her own way?

Time and performance pressure

Delegation tends to be hobbled by the increasing pressure placed on managers. Indeed, it is often more efficient to do something oneself than entrust it to a subordinate. It is also less risky to seize the reins at the least sign of trouble. Yet, nothing is more effective for destroying effective delegation! In the medium term, managers who react in this way become overloaded and demoralize their subordinates. So, the question is not whether or not one should delegate, but rather what to delegate, to whom and when, in order to do it effectively.

A different frame of reference

Finally, many managers reached their position in recognition of their exceptional performance. Once they become managers, they naturally find it difficult to delegate tasks from which they derive their professional pride. How can they appreciate work that is not done as they would have done it? How can one assume responsibility for something one does not fully control? How can one derive satisfaction from delegating?

To work well, delegation must follow five principles

1. Carefully choose **what to delegate**
2. **Select those** to whom to delegate
3. Establish a clear **delegation agreement**
4. Play the game **all the way to the end!**
5. **Coach** your subordinates

Remember!

- **Delegate complete processes or projects rather than individual tasks.** This will be more motivating and educational for your subordinates and you will avoid creating a fragmented management situation where you must step in frequently to coordinate.
- **Try to delegate matters you master well** so that you can effectively track your subordinate's progress and still guarantee the results.
- **Avoid delegating urgent or high-stakes matters,** because you will need to track them so closely that you cannot truly delegate

1st principle
Carefully choose **what to delegate**

The main point of delegation for most managers is to improve efficiency, liberate time and free their minds to focus on more critical matters.

A natural reaction is thus to delegate trivial matters first, as such tasks are perceived to be excessively time consuming. However, this approach is often counterproductive! In one typical example, a team manager believed he was delegating, but ended up micromanaging. *"I spent my days giving more and more detailed instructions, and I was forced to track the progress of each step of the project I had hoped to delegate. I spent a ridiculous amount of time on this!"* Merely entrusted with executing tasks, his demoralized subordinates did not understand the ins and outs of their contributions! Instead, subordinates must be entrusted with end-to-end responsibility for an entire project or process and be allowed to choose how to attain the objectives defined by the manager. This approach not only frees up the manager's time, but is also more motivating for subordinates and provides them with greater learning opportunities.

Another common mistake managers make is to delegate matters they do not understand well to someone more competent than themselves. However, this is often tantamount to abdicating their responsibilities. Many instances of delegation fail for this very reason. The person entrusted with the mission does not truly recognize the legitimacy of the manager to set objectives or evaluate the results. At the same time, the manager, frustrated at not being able to evaluate the progress of the project, often becomes so detached that he or she adds no value at all. This is why the best results are often obtained when delegation concerns matters that the manager masters perfectly. The manager will thus have no problem defining the desired result in a relevant manner, tracking progress and guiding the subordinate at key moments.

> Avoid delegating only annoying tasks that you simply want to avoid.

Finally, managers sometimes see delegation as a solution when they are collapsing under the weight of a number of urgent matters. However, such situations often leave little margin for error, so managers can rarely delegate high-stakes or highly urgent matters unless they have absolute and complete trust in the person who will assume responsibility.

Carefully choose what you wish to delegate:
Two dimensions to take into account

	NOT URGENT	URGENT
IMPORTANT	Delegate important, non-urgent matters only to **someone you trust** completely, and who possesses both the required skills and motivation.	**Avoid delegating** responsibility for critical, urgent matters, because the risk is too great, unless you can entrust them to someone capable of replacing you at the drop of a hat.
UNIMPORTANT	Delegate non-critical matters with flexible deadlines; these are ideal opportunities to **develop the autonomy** of your subordinates.	Delegate urgent matters only to someone who can be **rapidly operational** and who already masters at least part of the subject.

> *"Find them, don't train them."*
> **The Hands-off Manager**, Steve Chandler, Duane Black, Career Press, 2007

2nd principle
Select those to whom to delegate

Good managers know how to delegate. That goes without saying. But this doesn't mean that they must delegate to everyone indiscriminately! Frequent confusion on this particular point explains why many delegation attempts fail.

Indeed, **managers must trust the concerned subordinates for delegation to work,** because the delegation process involves some degree of blind faith. Managers remain responsible to third parties for the results obtained by their subordinates. Managers who lack faith that the assigned subordinates will do a good job may feel the need to micromanage, thus generating frustration on both sides, and wasting considerable time.

Given this challenge, managers are better off **delegating selectively** rather than systematically. Delegation is a good idea only if those entrusted with responsibility possess **three indispensable qualities,** namely, they possess the required technical skills, are glad to tackle the matter, and have an interactive style compatible with that of the manager.

If just one of these qualities is lacking, delegation probably won't work. Trying to resolve a competence problem with delegation is akin to throwing someone into the water to see if he can swim! At the same time, possessing the right skills doesn't mean a person is ready to assume a given responsibility; he or she must also have a real desire to carry out the mission—delegation is demanding! Finally, the rapport between the manager and the subordinate must be good for delegation to go smoothly. Otherwise, the requisite bond of trust will not form.

> Delegate only to those you trust.

Managers who cannot find subordinates who possess all three of these qualities will be better off defining the assignment to be delegated more narrowly, or adopting a different management style.

Check-list
for choosing to whom to delegate

- Does the person under consideration possess the required technical **skills and credibility** to carry out the assignment in question?
- Does the person **want** to take on these new responsibilities? Is the person willing to get personally involved and take risks? Do you trust the person's judgment?
- Do you think this person will be **reliable** about reporting on progress or challenges? Will the person provide the required level of information? Etc.

> *"Managers can afford to not have a solution, but not to lack criteria [for evaluating the relevance of potential solutions]."*
> **Diriger sans imposer**, [Direct, Don't Dictate], Filip Vandendriessche, Eyrolles, 2007

3rd principe
Establish a **clear delegation agreement**

When managers delegate, they no longer dictate solutions, but act more like customers for a finished product; they are thus responsible for expressing their needs clearly.

Many instances of delegation fail precisely because needs are expressed poorly: they either remain tacit or are articulated so operationally or restrictively that no real autonomy is conferred.

Frustration is then generated on both sides. A case in point is the head of an events company who asked a subordinate to take care of the logistics for an upcoming trade fair. When the manager saw the selected hotel list, he fumed "That's not what I wanted at all!" Yet, the employee was sure that he had done the job perfectly. The director, however, wanted the company's key clients to stay near his own hotel, so that he could easily network with them. By omitting to make this tacit criterion explicit, he doomed the delegation to failure. Conversely, there are many examples of subordinates taking initiatives that are ill-fated because they are simply outside of the scope of their responsibilities.

Successful delegation thus often requires a **clear delegation agreement,** in which the desired results are defined precisely, while letting those responsible decide how to achieve them. The manager must also define the criteria for evaluating the relevance of the selected solution and the extent of the authority delegated. This naturally reduces the leeway available to the subordinate, while ensuring that the proposed solution will be acceptable. Clarifying the terms of the delegation is thus the best way to establish the climate of trust needed for success.

> Delegation does not mean total liberty, but conditional liberty.

Remember!

- **Specify the desired outcome, but not the operational process to achieve it.**
  Tip: If you find yourself specifying intermediary steps, you may be stepping on your subordinate's toes.
- **Explain the criteria for evaluating the relevance of possible solutions.**
  Tip: Before meeting with the subordinate, jot down several solutions that spontaneously come to mind. Analyze them to determine which aspects are critical to you in terms of the chosen solution.
- **Clearly define the scope of delegation.**
  Tip: Set mandatory thresholds for transmitting information to you; specify what the subordinate is not allowed to do, etc.

4th principe
Play the game **all the way to the end!**

Defining the scope of delegation is not enough. To be effective, subordinates must also have **sufficient freedom to make decisions and access to the resources they need**. For example, if a manager asks a subordinate to carry out a cross-departmental project, he or she must introduce the employee in question to the other department heads concerned, and clearly state that this individual has been vested with the required authority. Then, to protect the subordinate's credibility, all requests concerning the matter must be directed to that individual, even if the manager himself could provide the answer.

> Delegating responsibility is not enough; one must also delegate authority over resources and decisions.

Taking delegation all the way also means **staying the course despite the inevitable hitches** that are bound to occur at some point. Although managers are naturally tempted to step in at the least sign of trouble, intervening in this way blocks subordinates from learning to solve problems on their own. Manager intervention also deprives them of the freedom to create new solutions to deal with difficult situations. To resist this temptation, some managers deliberately choose to steer clear of certain operational information (see example).

Example

The way one national director of a petrochemical firm answered a question on inventory is a perfect illustration of successful delegation: "Since I don't know the first thing about it, I can confidently state that we have no more than 100 tons of inventory, because if we did, my production manager would naturally have told me about it." This director does not enter into the operational details, but he trusts that he receives all of the information he needs. He is thus not tempted to intervene.

Based on **Diriger sans imposer** [Direct, Don't Dictate], Filip Vandendriessche, Eyrolles, 2007.

5th principe
Coach your subordinates

Successful delegation also means managers must be able to **change their mindset**. In particular, they must give up being the "go-to person" and adopt a listening posture.

Indeed, in traditional hierarchical relationships, managers are primarily concerned with being understood, giving directions, verifying that procedures are carried out properly, etc. Conversely, in delegation mode, managers must **listen carefully and understand their subordinates.** Based on the questions their subordinates ask, managers can fine-tune objectives or help their employees explore different options without telling them what to do. One manager recounts that he empowered his subordinates by raising questions at meetings, then letting a pregnant silence fall. This was an effective way of making people understand that he was not there to provide answers systematically and of habituating them to propose their own solutions.

> Delegation is effective only if the manager coaches the subordinate.

This does not mean that managers cannot have their own opinions. However, these opinions must primarily focus on the consistency of results with the established objectives, as well as the relevance of the proposed solutions.

This listening-based management method can be compared to coaching, as it **encourages subordinates to be more proactive and take the full measure of their autonomy and responsibilities.**

Remember!

- **Try to understand rather than to be understood;** start from the subordinate's experience of the issue at hand and not what you think he or she should do.
- **Raise questions without demanding immediate answers,** to allow the subordinate to follow his or her own line of reasoning and feel responsible for the solution.
- **Remain available, but wait until you are asked.** For example, set up regular meetings where the subordinate can freely cover points he or she considers important.

Adapt your management style

TRADITIONAL DIRECTIVE STYLE	DELEGATIONAL STYLE
You talk; subordinates listen	Listen to subordinates
Provide precise instructions	Set limits within which subordinates are free to act
Propose methods	Define criteria for evaluating quality
Provide the answers	Raise questions without expecting immediate answers
Be highly involved and check up on subordinates to verify they are doing what they were told	Make yourself available upon request, without being invasive
Check to see that processes are properly executed	Verify results and the relevance of the chosen solution