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## Delegating Decisions

### WHAT IF YOU COULD FIND A POWERFUL

instrument for “turbo-charging” performance? Turbo-charged as in taking advantage of opportunities, being resilient when confronted by issues, outwitting competitors, or making lasting improvements.

Fact is, you already have heard of such a tool. More often than not, however, it languishes at the bottom of the leader’s toolbox. The versatile instrument that lets us achieve more by doing less is simple: delegating decisions.

We know what happens when leaders don’t delegate, when they choke the reins as they drive through difficult conditions. When leaders stop delegating, employees find themselves working under “no-win” options. They must navigate a mind-boggling proliferation of policies and procedures, kicking everything upstairs or being criticized for taking initiative. The leaders may actually be worse off: wondering why so much of their time is spent making rules or deciding trivial matters, getting mad that staff isn’t getting the job done, or devising punitive measures—which further stifle creativity in a vicious circle.

Defies common sense, doesn’t it? No leader would say those outcomes are the ones she wants.

Great leaders sometimes delegate so effectively that they appear not to be doing much of anything. Can you think of an example from your own experience—a time when you acted on your own initiative with nothing

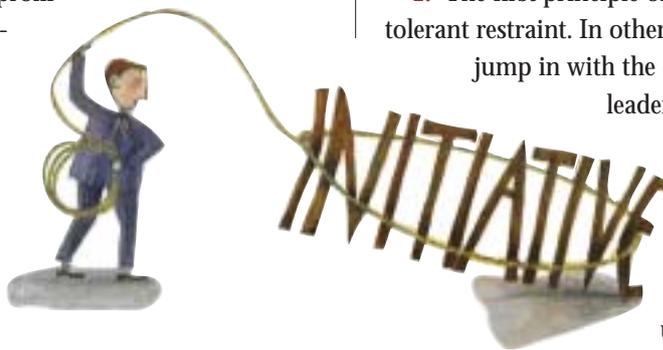
more than the boss’s encouragement? The outcome was successful, wasn’t it? And the satisfaction of getting something accomplished easily and quickly gives everyone involved a good feeling.

When leaders understand delegation, they unleash action that accelerates progress toward goals. Delegation is subtle, mysterious, and simultaneously the most powerful institutional force and the most fragile. Done well, it becomes an art form. Just as talent reveals itself in those artists who have applied themselves to their craft, those who discipline their minds to entrust their fate to others—to delegate—reveal effective leadership.

We offer three keys to delegating decisions.

1. The first principle of delegation is forbearance—tolerant restraint. In other words, resist the impulse to jump in with the quick rescue. Subordinates ask leaders all kinds of questions, present any variety of issues, and make all manner of suggestions. They make it easy for leaders to call the shots. Making the call can be a reflex; not until later does the leader get that “oh, shoot!” feeling as he realizes that now he owns the outcome.

Keeping sole ownership of outcomes carries a heavy price. Betsy recently coached a manager working herself up from an administrative position within a medium-sized manufacturing company. Her old habits—answering every question, solving every problem, handling every assignment herself—were holding her back from promotion. More important, she was exhausted. She knew she



needed to delegate but feared that would make her seem weak or incompetent.

This all-too-typical manager was trapped until she began to see how her own assumptions about other people's reactions paralyzed her. Indeed, the key to acting with restraint is understanding our thought process.

When someone asks us to turn our attention to an issue, our thinking follows as morning follows night. Our mind generates all manner of ideas; those that provoke a strong feeling propel us to action. Before we know it, we have given an instruction, sent the e-mail, walked down the hall, told others what to do. Not until later do we pause and reflect on the day's events and perhaps realize that we should have taken another path.

A leader who can "see" his or her own thinking is more apt to find the gaps between thoughts. That's where you can tap the resource of reflection, which stops knee-jerk answers. This act of "catching your thoughts" while they are happening creates the space to delegate responsibility.

**2.** Besides forbearance, the leader who is adept at delegation has focus. She is mindful of the goals, not the tactics. What matters to her is the organization's continuous progress toward outcomes over the long run. In practical terms, this causes the leader to loosen her hold on her own right answer. From that stance, she will be astonished at the creative capability of the staff; she will prize mistakes—seizing them as teaching opportunities that deepen the organization's competence. And she will stay out of the details for most things, giving her time to invest in the tough issues that the

staff find hard to handle.

Make no mistake, we aren't suggesting that the leader doesn't care about day-to-day actions and results. She appreciates that progress in the long run depends on the cumulative effect of many, many small actions taken one day at a time. But the leader invests relatively little of her energy in these accomplishments. Her mental acuity instead is spent on strengthening the institution's capacity and on ensuring that people attend to the success variables that matter.

In one sense, the leader "jumps the boundaries of time." To her, the future is now. Directing her thoughts toward goals causes the future to seem just as present and tangible as the computer keys used to write this column. Goals take form because thoughts produce feelings, and it's our feelings that provoke action.

**3.** Finally, the leader who delegates effectively ensures that the company's overall tone, or feeling, is positive. People avoid taking responsibility when the climate is fearful or when stepping into situations risks retribution.

How does the leader know when he is delegating effectively? One of GE's leaders reported that he was shocked at how quickly his organization got on with the job once they believed he was truly interested in delegation. Problems were solved at their source; opportunities were seized when they first surfaced.

Another obvious manifestation is that the staff takes ownership for results. Not only is it apparent that they care about outcomes, but the effort that they put into their work also increases. The leader feels assured that the staff will do whatever it takes to accomplish the desired

results. People will take responsibility for corrective action or initiative even when the effort isn't part of their formal role. They begin pointing out where they need more authority so they can act more freely and timely. What could be more thrilling?

Most important, however, is the tangible sense that the organization is raising its collective sights as to where they position the performance bar. Goals that were seen as impossible to reach suddenly fall in the "no brainer" category. Employees begin pointing out structural impediments to the boss so that he can take corrective action. And they ask for more development, for co-workers with complementary talent, and for the replacement of malcontents. The leader's job becomes more about listening to the staff tell him what they need in order to get the job done.

Leaders know that the most important thing is for their staff to believe that they "did it themselves." In truth, that is what happens when leaders delegate effectively. An event occurs, action is taken, and progress is made. Everyone, regardless of position or title, finds his or her own leadership capacity to help keep the ship on the right course. ■

*Bob Gunn is the co-founder of Gunn Partners, a consulting firm that helps companies improve the relevance and value of staff functions. He is responsible for client relationships for Gunn Partners' parent company, Exult, Inc., a premier business process outsourcer. You can e-mail Bob at [robert.gunn@exult.net](mailto:robert.gunn@exult.net).*

*Betsy Raskin Gullickson was an EVP for Ketchum Communications and is now a leadership coach and author.*