

S Letting Go to Get Ahead

SARAH WAS IN A QUANDARY—THOUGH OVER-loaded with work in her new position, she was hesitant to delegate her workload to her staff. She was still too new in the job to be confident that they would get it done to the standards that had got her promoted.

One of the most significant hurdles in the transition from “in the trenches” to “bigger picture” is learning to delegate. Leadership requires knowing when to exercise or delegate authority as well as how to assign accountability. But while responsibility can be shared, a leader can never get out from under it. As Harry Truman so famously said, “The buck stops here.” Or as Jim Collins observed in *Good to Great*: “Level 5 leaders (those who create stand-out organizations) look out the window to apportion credit to factors outside themselves when things go well...at the same time, they look in the mirror to apportion responsibility...when things go poorly.”

One way to look at power—and the delegation of power—is as a dance that balances three parts: authority, accountability, and responsibility. Often they are treated as the same, but their differences shape leaders.

- **Authority** is the right to decide, to command, to make things happen. Without authority a leader lacks the capacity to produce the required results.

- **Accountability** means answering for your actions, taking the appropriate blame (or credit). A person who is accountable is, indeed, required to “stand and account” for outcomes under all circumstances.

- **Responsibility** encompasses fulfilling obligations,

which includes, when necessary, making things right. The word literally means “able to respond”—not failing to act if capable of action.

Consider, for example, the classic story of young George Washington chopping down the cherry tree. The act was a problem because the boy didn’t have the *authority* to do it. When his father confronted him, George didn’t try to shift the blame or make excuses—he admitted doing it. He was admirably *accountable*. But in order to be *responsible*, he needed to go one step further and make things right by planting another tree.

We all know that delegating is important, and we may be motivated to look for all sorts of techniques to help. Every leader knows that uneasy feeling of delegating outcomes to a subordinate—that question of “Will he really be able to deliver the goods?” That

fear leads to all sorts of organizational hobgoblins: micro-managing, “doing the subordinate’s job for them,” confusion over roles and accountabilities, pointing the finger of blame, covering one’s a** with e-mails or memos, insecurity, paralyzing fear, pushing decisions upstairs, etc. The list is pretty long, and the impact on productivity, action, and tone can be quite debilitating.

Mastering this art must begin and end with a word usually avoided in business: Faith.

Normal practice is to avoid that word in favor of less religiously loaded terms, such as “confidence” or “trust.” In truth, however, all leaders eventually find themselves acting on faith.

Faith is having absolute certainty or conviction about



something for which there is no proof. In business this is also called “going on gut instinct.” Ironically, the bigger the idea or decision, the more faith plays a role.

Part of faith is knowing that we have our whole lives to draw upon. This isn't our first breath nor the first beat of our heart. Willy or nilly, we have piled up experiences. However dysfunctional we may sometimes feel, we have learned lessons. We don't walk into the unknown alone; we have with us all of our experiences, all of our life's lessons to remind us that we can prevail, that we aren't without resources. As leaders, we must have faith that our people have more than enough knowledge, experience, and wisdom to get the job done. If they don't, we must have the confidence that they will be able to figure it out.

Faith is there when we have exhausted ourselves. When we have pulled every lever that we can think of and are shocked to stillness, what lies waiting for us is faith. It encourages us to put one foot forward and then the next and the next. Faith isn't a sweeping concept, it's simply keeping on with a sense that, somehow, everything will turn out okay. A manager may despair and say she has lost faith. But we can never really lose faith; we just lose track of it.

By considering the significant questions with a calm mind, we are open to receiving insights that alter perceptions and stimulate new behaviors. The only thing leaders need to “do” is to strengthen their faith, giving this ability the respect and attention that it deserves.

It takes a leap of faith to believe that others not only have the capacity to step up but that they also have the commitment to make whatever

contribution is required. The full authority to act must accompany delegation of responsibility.

This is where skillful managers distinguish themselves. Like good parents, they place the outcome squarely on their lieutenant's shoulders while communicating the feeling of utter confidence in her success. The leader must trust that things will work out.

Whenever a manager is only paying lip service to delegation, however, people are quick to see that the deeds don't match the words. They stop trying and wait for the leader to call the shots. They forego their God-given ability to access their common sense and withdraw to the known, to what has worked before.

Effective delegation releases more constructive energy than anything else a manager can do. The effort of any one person, no matter how talented, is dwarfed by the contributions of many. This is so obvious that it needs no proof. But it does require a willingness to acknowledge that possibilities exist beyond our own knowledge or experience. When leaders have such confidence—such faith—they unleash the creativity and contributions of others, who step forward in the moment with what is needed. ■

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