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How to Stop Doing Employees' Work For Them

There's no point assigning a task to someone else if you're just going to take it back and do it yourself later. Avoid reverse-delegation

Merge Gupta-Sunderji || July 20, 2015



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If you have staff, you've probably faced this scenario at some point: You delegate a complex task to one of your employees and he or she comes back to you repeatedly with numerous questions, usually as you're rushing out for an important meeting or trying to focus on finishing a lengthy email. In exasperation, you say, "Just leave it with me, I'll look at it later." But in the back of your mind what you're really thinking is *It's probably just easier and faster to do this myself.*

You have just fallen victim to the classic leadership trap known as reverse delegation, the natural tendency to offer assistance by taking back a task you've assigned to someone else. But operating in this way is neither efficient nor productive. And it's bad leadership.

Here are a few things you can do to prevent reverse delegation and stop doing your employees' work for them.

DEFER YOUR RESPONSE

Your first instinct to a question about a task you've assigned should be to defer your response. You can do this without being dismissive simply by asking to meet another time. This puts the responsibility for the task firmly back on your employee's shoulders and ensures that you don't stumble into reverse delegation.

Once you meet and have a further discussion with your employee, you can keep the work flowing in the right direction by holding him or her accountable.

ARTICULATE THE PROBLEM

Have your employee crystallize the problem at hand, either verbally or in writing, in a few sentences. Making your employee succinctly articulate the issue, you will force him or her to logically think through it, rather than just reacting to the crisis of the moment. If necessary, say something like, "I've heard you identify several concerns. So that I fully understand the situation, can you briefly summarize the core issues for me in just a few sentences?"

GENERATE ALTERNATIVES

Ask your employee to generate alternatives. "How do you think we can address this issue?" or "What do you think the next step should be?" are great starters to get the conversation going. Don't blunder back into reverse delegation by coming up with the possibilities yourself. You delegated this task to this particular employee because he or she had the capability to perform, so rely on that competence. Your role is to guide him or her through the process of uncovering potential solutions.

Also of importance here is that you want alternatives—plural—from your staff member, so ask for at least two likely options. More than two is certainly okay, but one is insufficient. “What other possibility should we consider?” is often effective in sparking further ideas.

ASK FOR A RECOMMENDATION

Once you have at least two alternatives on the table, ask your employee for his or her recommendation. “What approach do you think is the best?” closely followed by “Why?” usually produces optimum results. Again, keep in mind that your employee in all likelihood has the skill level to come to the right conclusion on his or her own (which is why you delegated the task in the first place). But in order for that to happen, you have to push the accountability back into his or her lap.

A DOUBLE BONUS

One successful instance of reversing reverse delegation isn't enough. In the past, you've trained your employee to expect that you'll take the work back and do it yourself, so your change in behaviour won't necessarily achieve the intended result right away. But your tenacity in repeatedly pushing back on reverse delegation provides a double bonus: not only will it stop your workload from escalating but you will build skills and confidence in your employees.

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What will it take to stop you doing your employees' work for them? The biggest obstacle is you, and your often-unconscious mindset of *It's easier and faster to do it myself*. The hardest part of escaping reverse delegation is to have the presence of mind to catch yourself before you fall into the trap. Just remember that your success as a leader comes from your ability to help your staff accomplish their work objectives, not from doing their work yourself.

Merge Gupta-Sunderji is a speaker, author and consultant whose leadership development practice focuses on turning managers into leaders and people power into results. Through large-audience keynotes, small-group training, one-on-one mentoring, and customized consulting, Merge has given over 65,000 professionals in eight countries specific and practical tools to help them achieve leadership and communications success.

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Are you frequently a victim of reverse-delegation? How do you avoid doing employees' work for them? Share your strategies and tactics using the comments section below.
