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Thinking Steps: Moving out of a Delegation Dilemma

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Abstract

Although delegation is a much-talked-about topic among researchers and school administrators, many people, especially those who are newly appointed to assume positions, realize that they are in a delegation dilemma — while they feel it necessary to delegate some of their jobs to their subordinates, either to free themselves so that they can concentrate on more important things, or to develop their staff, they hesitate, and even find it difficult, to delegate.

Based on discussions with a large number of middle managers in schools who are Heads of Departments (HOD), Subject Heads (SH) and Level Heads (LH), and on the understanding of the situations they are in, this paper offers a delegation chart containing thinking steps to guide middle managers when they figure out how to step out of the delegation dilemma they are in, and how to do effective delegation. Embracing three categories of purposes of delegation, the chart presents 1) three essential steps of preparing for delegation; 2) three factors affecting selection of subordinates; and 3) four skills in making the assignment.

I. INTRODUCTION

The responsibilities at a level of administration are ever increasing. For Heads of Department (HOD), Level Heads (LH) and Subject Heads (SH) in schools, with a one-step promotion, their responsibilities increase immensely. Effective as they are, their responsibilities are always larger than they can take care of with their own capacity.

Situations in departmental work has made middle managers realise that no matter how much energy you expend; no matter how much time you spend; no matter how hard-working you are; no matter how talented you are; as a manager, you cannot do everything yourself. One HOD expressed that with graduating classes and an increase in the number of teachers in his department, there was a corresponding increase in the HOD's workload and it was impossible to be in charge of various levels. For example, an HOD from a secondary school enjoyed doing all the work, but felt extremely exhausted as a result of direct involvement in many activities. However, he noticed that the programmes were not run as effectively as they could have been. Another HOD had no problems with the routine tasks, but problems arose when new projects and programmes were to be run. He planned to have some enrichment programmes for each level, but he simply did not have enough time. Then he intended to have some teachers to handle each of the activities, but eventually never got them to oversee the implementation of the programmes. In another school, an HOD of Media/Resource in the library felt that buried in routine and less critical tasks that took too much of her time, leaving little time for important matters like improving and upgrading the library further.

Although they realise the necessity to delegate, many HODs, Subject Heads and Level Heads cannot think of delegation without seeing a dilemma: They feel like delegating some jobs to others, but they do not want to be seen by their superiors not doing their work;

they want to develop their staff through letting them learn new skills to do things at a higher level while they can free themselves to concentrate on more important things, they receive rejections from teachers who often perceive delegation as an excuse for an HOD to abdicate responsibilities or pass the buck. Hence they hesitate, and even find it difficult, to delegate. Normally, the way for them to do administrative work is to handle tasks as they come along. They prefer to do the jobs by themselves as they do not want to impose responsibilities on teachers, thinking that they are busy with their duties as well. They often find it hard to see the teachers because of their teaching schedule. This makes entrusting jobs and monitoring a delegated job very difficult.

Yet, HODs are aware that one of their major functions is to develop their staff, and that delegation is one of the means to carry out these functions. They also realise that delegation helps them to deal with the increasing complexity of their functions, hence they should and have to delegate. When they delegate, it is essential for them to do it skilfully. A delegation chart is presented in the next section to help them think about ways to step out the delegation dilemma.

II. PURPOSES OF DELEGATION

Effective delegation enables HODs, LHs and SHs to concentrate on the most important things within their departments. Through entrusting some of the jobs to others to complete, they can work on more important things. Generally, delegation helps HODs to make more effective use of their time, to motivate their teachers, and to assess the teachers' potential and develop their skills.

As one of the functions of HODs is to develop the staff in the department, effective delegation creates opportunities for staff development. Some teachers may be ready for promotion or new job classifications like Level Head, Subject Head and so forth. The HOD may develop these teachers to learn new skills. By assigning some of HOD's jobs to these teachers that are new and outside their regular teaching and ECA duties, the HOD provides opportunities for them to grow.

Delegation is used as a motivator of staff members. Although teachers have heavy workloads, new assignments can help to relieve the boredom of carrying out routine tasks and to increase enjoyment in their work. Teachers will feel that their talents are noticed and tapped. They will feel that they are important to the department and school. This motivator can be effective especially to those who have the desire for achievement and recognition, and who are welcoming challenging work. While giving credit and public recognition to those teachers, the HOD sets a standard for other teachers in the department.

Purposes

Generally, there are three combinations of purposes—

1. To free yourself, but your delegate is not developed through doing your job.
2. To free yourself, and to develop your delegate as well.
3. To get yourself involved in the task while developing your staff.

These combinations can be illustrated in the following chart:

Exhibit 1. DEVELOPING A DELEGATION CHART

PURPOSE		TASK	SKILL
To Free Myself	To Develop My Staff		
C1		--	--
Yes	No	--	--
----- ----- -----			
C2		--	--
Yes	Yes	--	--
----- ----- -----			
C3		--	--
No	Yes	--	--
----- ----- -----			

*specify the objectives &
clarify your expectations
provide support
remote controlling
show recognition &
appreciation*

The way to use this chart is like this: First, make a list of tasks you intend to delegate, and then arrange them into the three categories according to your purposes.

C1 (Category 1). To free yourself, but your delegate is not developed through doing your job.

For example: I need to collect and collate data for a particular level, and to do item analysis. I am considering to assign this job to 2 teachers, and they will carry out this duty without my guidance.

When you delegate just for the purpose of freeing yourself and not to develop your staff members, it will be less likely for you to see reluctance or receive rejection if you ask for a personal favour and assign the job in a friendly manner.

C2 (Category 2). To free yourself, and to develop your delegate as well.

For instance: I am in charge of the Humanities Department with additional responsibilities of heading the NPCC Unit. I have little time to initiate new activities or monitor existing instructional programmes effectively. I decide to delegate the task of running the NPCC Unit to a teacher, which will enable me to concentrate on the programmes in my department.

C3 (Category 3). To get yourself involved in the task while developing your staff.

For example, upon returning from a conference on creative thinking with a teacher, instead of holding a sharing session for the teachers in my department by myself, I will let this teacher prepare and conduct the session. Lacking presentation skills and exposure, the teacher may be nervous in front of the audience although she is confident in her class. I will work with her on the materials, give her guidance, and stand by at the sharing session.

Once you have arranged the tasks, think of relevant skills in doing the delegation. These skills include: specifying objectives and clarifying expectations; providing support; remote control; and showing recognition and appreciation.

Effective delegation entails careful preparation—planning and selecting delegates; making the assignment--assigning jobs, remote controlling, reviewing; and finally, accepting the job completed-- recognising and rewarding when the job is done. These steps are shown in the following section.

III. HOW TO DELEGATION

Delegation is dependent upon several variables, including the type of job, the experience and skill of the subordinates, the timing of the situation, and the working relationship between the delegator and the delegates. A common cause of failure in delegation in departmental work lies in inadequate preparation, briefing, training and assistance, according to Trethowan (1991), who stresses the importance of adequate training both to the personal development and the self-confidence of the delegates.

Preparation

Three essential steps of preparing to delegate:

- Developing the right attitude,
- Deciding what to delegate, and
- Considering to whom to delegate.

Usually, there exists an attitude problem among HODs. They are concerned about their personal security, or they are not sure whether they are willing to take risks. Hence there is a necessity to overcome and remove this psychological block. Some HODs have problems trusting their delegates for “good reasons”--- “I am the only one who can do the job.” “By the time I tell someone what and how to do, I could have done it myself.” “I’ll end up with spending even more time doing it all over again.” “Nothing that I do can be delegated.” “I don’t want to be seen as not doing the work myself.” (Keenan, 1996) The problems here are mainly 1) they are unwilling to delegate as they feel that they are irreplaceable; 2) they are disorganised and unable to sort out things so as to decide on what to delegate; 3) they are unable to recognise other people’s strengths; and 4) more importantly, they are unable to accept differences in working approaches or to accept results objectively.

Selection of Subordinates

When selecting delegates, HODs have to keep in mind that the suitable person to delegate an assignment to may not be the most skilful or experienced one. It depends on time, nature of the job, and the purpose of delegating the job. The key factors affecting your selection include —

- Demonstrated skill;
- Personal or professional interest; and
- Staff workload.

HODs know their teachers very well as to who have particular qualifications and skills, and who have shown or expressed interest in certain tasks. For example, when preparing for a presentation, an HOD had in her mind a teacher who was very good in computer, always making colourful and interesting transparencies for his classes, and considered this teacher for help. Another example is that an HOD planned to arrange a supplementary course. He chose three teachers to match the task: One showed promise, enthusiasm, and often offered good ideas to the department; the other two were good organisers and once successfully helped carry out some activities in the department. The HOD was confident that these teachers were capable of performing the duties.

Another factor is on the teachers' side—some of them perceive delegation with a negative connotation. Some teachers are unwilling to do something extra: they prefer to stick to the defined job and not to do beyond their duties. Some teachers are reluctant: they pretend not to understand, or not to remember to complete tasks by deadlines. Some are fearful: they tend to protect themselves by avoiding criticism of their mistakes.

Make the Assignment

- *Specify objectives and clarify expectations*

There are some common problems and pitfalls in delegation: the delegator fails to provide authority and entrusts without adequate explanation. When you delegate a task to your delegate, the first thing to do is to tell your delegates the *results* you want and let your delegates know in advance what you expect from them. Some HODs found that the work delegated was not done to meet their expectations either because of the teacher's lack of commitment or because of HODs' clarifications of responsibilities and expectations. To avoid these pitfalls, it is advisable to hold briefings to the delegates to tell them clearly the objectives, to identify potential difficulties, to discuss how these difficulties could be handles, and to clarify the assessment criteria.

- *Provide support*

While your delegates are implementing the work, they may come back to you sometimes. Since they are doing your job, you need to support them when they need your help, especially when they are puzzled; or when they need more resources. Also, do not withhold information as a test.

For instance, an HOD delegated a task of organising an annual camp to a teacher who had camping experience but never organised one. The teacher was enthusiastic but apprehensive about the work. After the job took too much of her time, she could not continue, and did not receive any help from the HOD, who was too busy and assumed that the teacher could hold on to it. The job was not completed, and the HOD had to look into the matter.

In an analysis of the cause of this failure, it was noticed that at the early stage, the teacher showed enthusiasm, and worked out a theme and a programme for the 3-day camp, and discussed with the HOD. Because the teacher lacked of confidence and the HOD was unable to provide assistance, the teacher could not carry on the job.

- *Remote control*

Since it is your work completed by others, delegation does not merely mean passing downwards of work -- you are responsible for it; and you empower the subordinates with some authority to make decisions. After you entrust the task and empower limited authority, check the progress on a regular base or at agreed intervals. While your delegates are doing the work, do not spy on them, or harp on their mistakes.

An example here shows that an HOD planned to delegate the task of organizing supplementary courses to 3 of his teachers to work as a committee. Because of the importance of the courses as they were a supplementary component to the main instructional programme, the HOD gave the 3 teachers some authority to made decisions but they had to consult him on key decisions like the cost of the course and choice of agencies.

- *Show recognition and appreciation*

When the job is done, provide recognition and appreciation for your delegate's help and for the work completed.

IV. CONCLUSION

A delegation chart is presented in this paper that embraces three categories of purposes of delegation. Their three purposes are: 1) to free yourself, but your delegate is not developed through doing your job; 2) to free yourself, and to develop your delegate as well; and 3) to get yourself involved in the task while developing your staff.

The three essential steps of preparing for delegation are "developing the right attitude; deciding what to delegate, and considering to whom to delegate". Three factors affecting selection of subordinates are "demonstrated skill; personal or professional interest; and 'staff workload". The four skills in making the assignment are "specify the objectives and clarify expectations; provide support; remote control; and show recognition and appreciation".

The thinking steps which were described in this paper and meant to help middle managers moving out of the delegation dilemma are summarised as follows —

1. Tell yourself you have to delegate, and it is all right to delegate.
2. Decide on what you work on, and what others can do for you.
3. Consider and select your delegate.
4. Brief the delegate on the task.
5. Support your delegate.
6. Check the work in progress at agreed intervals.
7. Show appreciation and give credit to the delegate upon completion to the job.

Effective delegation is a productivity skill. It makes HODs more competent in their administrative work and confident in delegation itself. One HOD of Media/Resource expressed that with effective delegation she was able to manage her library more efficiently and to keep abreast with changes in information technology as well as developments in library. It frees HODs for more critical tasks, and more importantly, it helps HODs to motivate and develop teachers, and to assess their potential. The staff benefit from delegation

as it provides opportunities for them to learn new skills to do things at a higher level. As a result, they become more productive. For those who are promising, their personal and professional growth and promotion potential are therefore enhanced.

In conclusion, delegation is one of the most valuable tools in a manager's tool kit. More and more HODs, SHs and LHs have seen delegation as a very beneficial tool in helping them to be effective managers.

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