Initiative, Personal Responsibility, and Delegation

Part 12 in a 12-Part Series on Helping First-Time Managers and Seasoned, But Untrained, Supervisors Transition to Effective Leaders

"I believe the ability to delegate effectively is one of the most important skills a manager can have. However, I've seen managers encounter several problems when attempting to delegate!"

–Ken Blanchard, author of *The One Minute Manager*

About the Supervisory Basics Article Series

The transition from an individual contributor to a supervisory or managerial role is one of the most critical and difficult career moves.

Representing the largest pool of management talent in most companies, supervisors prove critical to an organization's success. Companies that develop superior leaders in these supervisory positions can execute more effectively than their competition.

This article, *Initiative, Personal Responsibility, and Delegation*, is based on Module #12 from The Supervisory Basics Series, a 12-Part Series on Helping Individual Contributors and Seasoned, But Untrained, Supervisors Transition to Effective Leaders.

The Supervisory Basics Series consists of 12 individual yet linked two-hour modules, delivered in leader-led or eLearning formats, helping managers understand the management behaviors and tactics required to ensure their own and their company's success.

More information on The Supervisory Basics Series can be found at the conclusion of this article.

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Taking the work that others should be doing as a result of incorrect notions of the role of manager, the need for control, and the need to be seen as helpful, creates a cycle of dependency upon the manager.

Introduction

Learning the basic skills for creating initiative in the workplace—specifically preventing upward delegation and effectively delegating appropriate tasks and assignments—is a critical skill all successful managers must learn. New managers or supervisors who fail to develop these skills can easily find themselves in the trap of doing for employees what employees can and should be doing for themselves. The reasons for doing this are varied—anything from incorrect ideas of the role of the manager, to the need for control, to providing inappropriate "help" to employees.

Supervisors and managers who haven't thought through these issues can inadvertently hinder the development of initiative and personal responsibility in their employees. Under the guise of "helping their employees," supervisors and managers step in and do the work that is the employee's responsibility. The downstream consequence is the erosion of talent, bench strength, and employee development and motivation. An additional unintended consequence is a waste of the new manager's time.

Managers are responsible for (1) doing their own work and (2) managing the work of others. Time spent managing others must be spent with purpose and focus—not doing the employee's work. Leveraging supervisory time wisely is a must. A new manager or supervisor who is unable to leverage their time will also lose their influence over their employees—making the job much more difficult.

Preventing Upward Delegation

We all know about the managerial saying, "a monkey on my back," coined by William Oncken Jr. years ago. A "monkey" is defined as the work to be done. For new managers, doing the employee's work—upward delegation—is taking on "inappropriate monkeys."

There are several reasons new managers accept monkeys:

- I can do it better.
- I can do it faster.
- I've done it before and I enjoy it.
- I don't really trust the employee to do it right.
- The employee might not know how to do it.

Regardless of the rationale or good intention, these ways of thinking create a situation where the supervisor must continue to do the employees' work. The employee can't learn or develop, and the

manager must waste critical management time that could have been spent on the manager's more critical responsibilities.

While well-intended, taking employees' "monkeys" leads to very negative unintended consequences:

- Employees are not developed.
- Employees learn to bring everything to the boss rather than make an effort to work things through on their own.
- No innovation or creativity in how tasks get done—manager does it his/her old way.
- Responsibility and accountability for work is shifted from employee to supervisor.

Helping is not doing other's work for them.

Perhaps the most negative result of doing work that employees should be doing is the creation of a culture of dependency—where the employee depends on the manager to tackle all the tough issues, get things done, and make all the decisions. This is the antithesis to superior performance, and it erodes personal initiative and responsibility in the workplace. Initiative and responsibility are highly desired employee qualities, and managers can often be unaware that they are inadvertently discouraging initiative and responsibility.

Assigning Work and Initiative

The primary goal when it comes to assigning additional work or responsibilities is to be equitable—fair to each direct report. The temptation, of course, is to overload good employees with more than their fair share of assignments, because you know they can be counted on, while your poor performers are skipped over.

For "same jobs with same pay," the additional work relevant to that job should be assigned to everyone in turn. If this is not done, the less skilled or demotivated employees will never develop initiative and the top performers will be over-burdened. This is not effective talent management.

Now, of course, the new manager needs to be prepared for resistance or excuses from employees. Assigning work to just those who don't have excuses won't develop "bench strength." When cooperation is needed from everyone in the department, accepting excuses leads employees to believe that the new manager is a pushover—and legitimacy in the new managerial position is compromised.

Here are some of the excuses a new supervisor might hear, with appropriate responses:

Excuse	Response
"Fred usually does that job."	"That may be true, but I would like to ensure that everyone in the group takes on a variety of assignments."
"No one has taught me how to do that yet."	"Then this is a good time to learn how. I will work with you this time so you can get up to speed."
"I'm swamped—can't you find someone else who's not busy?"	"Everyone is busy, and this time I need you to do it. You can be sure everyone else will get additional assignments routinely."
"If I do that, I'll have to put off some other things I'm doing."	"I understand. Let's talk about what things can be put off short- term and what can't. Everyone has to balance their workload at times."

Caution: a new manager needs to take the time to determine the validity of these excuses. The risk of being wrong is higher until he or she gets to know the people and the routine. And if, in the process, a supervisor discovers that extremely competent and cooperative people have had an undue burden placed on them, then the new supervisor needs to stop that process and replace it with a system where work is distributed evenly and fairly.

Assigning Overtime

Overtime assignments often come into play for new managers or supervisors. Some potential pitfalls that new managers should avoid when assigning overtime are:

- Assigning overtime just because people don't accomplish what they should during normal working hours.
- Using overtime as a reward or punishment—as this can easily lead to discriminatory issues and/or perceptions of favoritism.
- Scheduling that doesn't consider the particular wants and needs of employees.

Often, there are enough people who want overtime to fill overtime requirements without imposing on those who don't. However, when overtime demand requires a new manager to juggle the schedule, here are some guidelines to help.

- Using a rotation is a good way to ensure fairness.
- Don't rotate for the sole purpose of rotation if you have plenty of people to fill overtime needs and some who don't want overtime.
- Allow workers to fill in for each other as long as you are kept informed.

- Don't allow overtime unless the appropriate amount of work is being done during regular hours.
- Don't allow overtime to become an expected entitlement (if it is not part of the routine or the job description).
- Post overtime schedules as far ahead as possible.
- Whenever possible, try to accommodate workers who will be inconvenienced or burdened by overtime.
- When overtime is a normal part of the job, ensure all applicants are aware of this.

Delegating Work—To Delegate or Not

Before delegating, get to know the specific job responsibilities for each person and have a good feel for their performance.

All effective supervisors and managers have learned to delegate effectively. They have learned that delegation is a tool that both leverages their time and their influence, and develops employees. However, before delegating, the new manager needs to go slowly— getting to know the specific job responsibilities for each person— and have a good feel for their performance.

Managers should adapt their delegation practices according to the experience, performance, and attitude of the direct report. Effective diagnosing of these elements in each situation is a critical skill in any management practice.

By using a Performance Level Scale, a new manager can determine the amount of delegation to be used. **Level 1** is for employees with low ability/experience and low confidence or commitment. This employee can be delegated to, but will need structure and should advise the manager or supervisor before taking specific actions. This ensures that decisions, initiative and performance move in a positive direction.

Level 2 is for an employee with moderate ability/experience and moderate confidence/commitment. Managers can delegate in this situation by requiring the employee to initiate the action and requiring immediate briefing of the action taken.

Level 3 is for employees with excellent ability/experience and high confidence/commitment. Managers can delegate by providing the autonomy and control over action and decisions—requiring periodic updates from the direct report to keep in the loop.

Tasks to delegate include:

- Routine tasks and assignments that swallow up a manager's or supervisor's time
- Tasks and assignments that develop direct reports and allow them upward mobility

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- Tasks and assignment that provide effective cross training of direct reports—enabling the manager to gain more flexibility

Things not to delegate:

- Critical managerial or supervisor job responsibilities
- Only the unpleasant duties and tasks
- Poor workers' duties to good workers

When thinking of whom to delegate to, consider the following:

- Everyone—for purposes of cross training
- Those who desire development opportunities
- For the purpose of developing a particular competency in the group
- Everyone on a rotational basis for routine duties and tasks
- Anyone being groomed for other positions

While delegating, follow this process:

- Provide clarity about what you want done. Be specific and provide any needed instructions—in writing if lengthy.
- Provide clarity about deadlines for completion. Try to match the work with the capabilities of the employee. Don't hesitate to provide challenging assignments.
- Provide any necessary authority required to get the assignment done.
- Ensure the employee has access to you for assistance.
- Provide specific checkpoints when the assignment is lengthy. Be specific in your follow-up. Progress reports need to be about specific progress related to results– not a summation of tasks and assignments being worked on.
- Provide feedback on performance when assignment is completed.

Conclusion

When it comes to job responsibilities, a manager's ability to delegate work and get the most from employees is a hallmark of being a great leader. Once time has passed and the new manager has a good understanding of employees, their job requirements and skill sets, he or she can wisely use time and influence to create a high-performing culture whereby employees do their jobs and do them well. The manager, then, is able to do his her own work and has the time to focus on the skills necessary to be a great manager.

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About the Supervisory Basics Series

The Supervisory Basics Series is based on extensive analysis of the competencies required of transitioning individual contributors and seasoned, but untrained, supervisors. This series provides the knowledge, tools and skills to immediately establish a leadership role and helps participants understand how to avoid the typical traps of new supervisors and managers.

The Supervisory Basics Series helps managers understand the management behaviors and tactics required to ensure their own and their company's success. The result is managers establishing themselves in a legitimate position of power, inspiring superior performance and promoting open, effective communication.

Supervisory Basics also helps beginning managers avoid common new manager traps—lack of clarity in expectations, ineffective communications, not establishing personal power and failing to move from "doer" to leader. Such negative behaviors lead to absenteeism, low morale, and lost productivity and customer loyalty, as well as increased attrition.

The series consists of 12 individual yet linked two-hour modules, delivered in leader-led or eLearning formats. Companies can choose flexible implementation, including an integrated 3-day series, stand-alone sessions, mix and match, and external facilitator or train-the-trainer options. Participants will learn to build credibility, establish legitimate position power, earn personal power, "manage up," understand legal basics and conduct purposeful workplace discussions. Download the brochure.

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