

## The Hurdles to Effective Delegation

by Bob McGannon, PMP

*As businesses seek to tackle larger and more complex projects, the wise project manager will increase their ability to delegate effectively. This can be a very tricky game, as skills around the world are becoming increasingly scarce, and the pipeline of new personnel to replace them is slowing considerably. Project managers need to overcome the obstacles that get in the way of effective delegation, as a matter of survival. Here we will explore the obstacles to effective delegation, the cause of those obstacles (you might be surprised by a common cause) and the way forward to more effective and successful delegation.*

Hurdle #1 – “I don’t have anyone with the correct skills to whom I can delegate.”

The first lesson that needs to be learned is that delegation is not a five minute process – it is more like a five month process. As project managers, we have ‘risen to the top’ and have been given additional responsibilities by our management. We cannot expect those around us that haven’t been given that same level of additional responsibility to possess those same capabilities. If they did, they might be the project manager, and you might be reporting to them! Given that the people who are reporting to us – to whom we might consider delegating responsibilities - don’t always have the skills we would desire, it is up to us as project managers to correct this situation. Thus, skills transfer to enable others to help us needs to come from US, as project managers, and it does take time. When taking a new project assignment, the forward thinking project manager will plan additional time (even if it results in working overtime) to prepare their most promising staff members to effectively receive delegated assignments. It is the only way the astute project manager can prepare him/herself to take on greater and more demanding assignments.

Hurdle #2 – “I don’t have a staff member that I can trust with delegated responsibilities.”

The project manager that cannot bring himself to trust others is doomed to managing small and comparatively insignificant projects. Without releasing some responsibilities to others, the project manager is forever stuck with having to ‘do everything’ and therefore the projects they can manage are limited to what they can personally produce without assistance.

This is not a pretty picture; it limits the career of the project manager, and the ability of the businesses to gain the greatest amount of benefit. A major part of being a project manager is to identify and take on risk, mitigate it, and move forward. As projects always have a degree of uncertainty, we cannot be effective project managers and not be comfortable with some degree of risk. This is the first place we need to accept and address risk – by trusting others to help us with tasks, even those that are traditionally assigned to the project manager. Doing so enhances the loyalty of the team members to your leadership, expands team member capabilities (see point #1 above) and frees up the project manager to perform more strategic tasks. This, in turn, gives us time to think through scenarios that might increase the probability of project success, and work with team members to improve the overall project deliverables. In short, if you are having trust issues with delegation – get over it. Give the team members a chance, guide and correct them as necessary, have appropriate guidelines and procedures in place, and allow them to help you. Develop trust over time and through repetitive coaching of others, and help yourself and the project in the long run.

Hurdle #3 – “I can do it more effectively myself.”

So what? As we have already stated, most project managers have ‘risen to the top’ and have been given responsibilities beyond other staff members. It is mostly always true that project management related items that

one might consider for delegation could normally be performed as well or better by yourself than other staff members. However, refraining from delegating because you can perform this better yourself is a never ending self-fulfilling prophesy. Without delegating, coaching and giving your staff members the opportunity to take on responsibilities, you shall always be the ONLY one that can do things to your liking, limiting the project opportunities you will be able to manage. Help the business and help yourself, let others take the reins and give it their best shot. You might have to deal with a project issue if it doesn't work out – but without delegating, you will always be dealing with EVERY project issue because those around you will not be experienced enough to step up and take some of your workload when you need the assistance.

Hurdle #4 – “I don't have the authority to delegate to other team members.”

In talking with a large number of successful project managers that do perform effective delegation, rarely does one state that they had to ask for permission to delegate to their team members. As most capable team members will welcome the additional experience to help them grow, rarely does one approach the manager of a team member first. In developing a productive relationship with team members, the astute project manager can select tasks and people that are a good match, providing new experiences for the team member, while not stretching them so far that it puts their own technical project tasks at risk. Often, the best policy for this is “better to ask forgiveness than permission.” Should you be taken to task by a line manager who objects to your delegation to their staff member, you can always (truthfully!) say you had their best interests and the interest of ongoing projects in mind when you attempted to delegate. Better yet, if you have the ability to write your own project charters – ensure you include an item in the project manager's authority section that states you have the authority to delegate and assign tasks to team members to ensure effective use of project resources. This gives you the permission up front.

Hurdle #5 – “My team members are working on so many projects simultaneously, they don't have time to perform their own tasks, not to mention delegated tasks from me.”

Granted, more often than not, this hurdle exists in organisations. Finding staff members (especially good ones) that aren't already over-allocated can be a significant challenge. You will need management assistance and buy in to work through this particular problem. As good project managers are scarce in most organisations, the need to grow additional project management skill is the lever that a current project manager can use to try to carve out some time from the most promising staff members. As the organisation will also want to try to maximise the potential for keeping these high potential staff members, this also can be used as a lever for the project manager to try to convince line managers to allow them to take on some delegated project management tasks for growth purposes. That argument does not always work, but when the time comes, when a new project manager is needed and none have any appropriate experience, the argument starts to gain traction. Just be patient and persistent and you might just be able to start delegating tasks to promising staff members.

So, from years working with project managers, we have found that the most frequent root cause for lack of delegation is the project managers themselves! In all but one of the hurdles discussed above, if the project manager takes a different attitude towards delegation, the problem is solved! Expand your capabilities while expanding the capabilities of your project teams – overcome YOUR hurdles and try to delegate more responsibilities to others.

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