Embrace delegation as a skill to strengthen remote teams

Article

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Embrace Delegation as a Skill to Strengthen Remote Teams

In our ever-growing remote work culture, teams are increasingly vulnerable to virtual distance. Its three dimensions — physical, operational, and affinity distance — play critical roles in how well teams work together in a virtual environment and, particularly, in how managers delegate. Physical distance relates to the geographic distance between workers, while operational distance characterizes organizational processes that have the potential to facilitate or impede team collaboration. Affinity distance describes a sense of emotional and mental connection between individuals as a result of familiarity, interdependence, and a sense of shared purpose in the organization.

Managers of remote teams who improve their delegation skills can address virtual distance — the biggest impediment to their success — by leveraging delegation as a tool to close the gaps in physical, operational, and affinity distance. As our findings suggest, the strategic use of new collaboration technologies for delegation purposes can improve the quality of communication and technology fluency, which closes operational distance in remote teams. Similarly, gaps and divergence in purpose — which can make the difference between good and great teams — can be significantly narrowed by skillful delegation. For example, a manager who delegates what is deemed a make-or-break task, such as engaging with powerful stakeholders, can significantly reduce affinity distance for an employee who feels highly trusted for having been given such an opportunity.

When managers can successfully delegate, it builds much-needed trust within remote teams and earns their commitment by getting them involved in crucial aspects of the work. The result is deep emotional and mental connection to other teammates and their work, which helps overcome the barriers of physical distance. Skillful delegation also reduces the chances of micromanagement and lack of trust.

Toward a New Definition of Delegation

Within this distanced-work context, leaders must reconsider conventional delegation methods. Delegation, stemming from the Latin word delegare, means "to send out as an ambassador or representative." Traditional meanings of delegation include commissioning and appointing — such as a manager sending an employee to represent the company at a conference, or to attend an internal committee meeting on the manager's behalf.

But in permanently remote or hybrid work environments, this definition has become complicated; online, these delegated tasks are a click away from both the delegator and the delegate. In the virtual space, delegation therefore takes on a more nuanced meaning, given that both managers and employees are working in the same online environment. To delegate is therefore no longer to "send out" as an ambassador but to practice a skill.

Viewed as a doing concept, delegation has often been left to the manager to do when or where necessary, becoming a task done well or poorly. With a more modern understanding of the word, we can expand our understanding of delegation as a skill that can be developed and honed, becoming something managers possess and carry along in their practice. A well-developed, adaptable skill of delegation is transferable and will serve managers well in different remote environments.

Our Findings

To understand how leaders can successfully delegate and develop the skill of delegation in remote environments, we analyzed the online platform communications of nearly 1,200 managers and employees who work across the globe in a large Fortune 500 organization and

interviewed 64 leaders managing various functional units of the organization. In learning about their managerial and delegation processes, we identified the following habits which, when practiced consistently, can help build the crucial skill of delegation.

Make it visible. No one who succeeds beyond a certain level does it all by themselves, according to 74% of leaders we spoke with; they rely on others to do many things that they may once have thought they couldn't delegate. "Empowering others and trusting them is paramount. It takes time to do this, but it will ultimately lead to more productive, independent team members and leaders," said Aaron Kemmer, cofounder of Magic and Made In Space — and his view was echoed by the majority of leaders we spoke with.

Many leaders struggle with feeling like they need to do everything themselves, when often the opposite is true. Identifying your core capabilities and, even better, your skills gaps will allow you to be a better leader. List everything that needs to get done, add a star to the top three tasks you specifically need to handle, and circle what you can delegate to others. This simple process was mastered by 81% of our most effective delegators, who understand that determining what to do yourself and what to ask someone else to do can take up a lot of your time and energy. Seeing it in a simple visual format can help; apps like Google Tasks and Microsoft To Do easily integrate with most existing workspaces.

Embrace different approaches. When you delegate, things are often done in a different way than you would do them yourself. This is fine — even constructive. Trusting other people is the only way to expand the scope of your influence as well as build a pool of dependable hands available for such tasks. Trusting employees to deliver on set tasks implicitly signals to them that you have confidence in their ability to take on the additional responsibility. This is a powerful motivating factor for employees — and for you as a leader, it is a source of influence power, also known as leverage.

Set consistent expectations with yourself and others. For tasks that benefit from following a particular protocol or procedure as specified by your organizational policy or client requirements, make expectations clear and, where possible, codified. But if a task can be done multiple ways and the outcome is more important than the process, then allow for creativity, and practice letting go.

Communicate frequently and clearly. Encourage your team members to complete any task you assign them to the best of their ability, even if they aren't confident about the end result. They will learn from the process, and you can help them improve with each attempt. But you must set your team up for success; provide sufficient information when you delegate a task or assignment. Offering all of the relevant details and information from the start can prevent inadvertent bottlenecks. Frequent and clear communication is key. Be available for follow-up questions on tasks you delegate, and make yourself approachable to your team members. A common mistake leaders make is to delegate and walk away. Depending on the employee's experience level, there is a time and a place for this type of torch handoff, but in many cases, you will still need to be linked to a task for support or to review it upon completion.

Use new tech wisely. Technology can be an ally for delegation rather than a barrier. There are many project management apps meant to make collaboration easier. Your team may already have a collective preference for apps like Basecamp, Trello, or Asana. If not, pick one app and make sure everyone is trained to use it. If you have a specific way you'd like a task to be done, send videos of the process or take the time to screen-share and teach it live. With tools like Zoom and Teams, it's easy to hop on a video call, share your screen, and present a status update. A tip recommended by 88% of leaders we spoke with is for individuals tasked with a

project to set up midpoint check-ins to address open items or questions that might otherwise cause a delay.

Design your own work schedule — and stick to it. Delegation is not only about others' productivity but yours as well. Being deliberate about what you do during working hours requires discipline. If you're not careful, others can fill your day with meetings, leaving you no time for deep work — an issue cited by 31% of the least-effective delegators we studied. If you have to work on, say, accounts payable, block time for it on your schedule. That way, you'll have a fixed time to tackle a specific task, and others can see from your calendar that you're unavailable — which may deter them from scheduling a meeting without first asking you.

Remember that practice makes perfect. Delegation is a skill, like playing chess or the guitar. Don't expect to be instantly good at it, but if you start now, you'll get better over time. It takes work to train yourself to delegate. It may feel easier or faster to do a task yourself, but the long-term gains from staying focused on your core competencies will pay back in future dividends. The rise of remote work has made managers feel like they need to be involved in every part of the business to be successful, but this can have adverse effects on team effectiveness. To win, everyone on the team must play their part — and managers may need to orchestrate and facilitate that process. The deployment of delegation must go beyond doing it to becoming skillful at it. The former approach deploys delegation superficially as a checkbox-style activity, often with limited results, while the latter deploys delegation to get the best out of remote teams. Only with this latter approach are effective remote teams built within the current remote workforce. At a time when everyone is navigating tremendous collective change, intentionally embracing the skill of delegation can help ensure that your team can comfortably adapt and thrive in this new world of work.