Delegating

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Host: Are you a manager who knows when and how to delegate effectively or could you use a refresher course on how to improve your delegation skills? I'm your host, Marianne Jacobbi. Welcome to our podcast for managers. We're here today with John Beeson. He's a management consultant based in New York, a regular blog contributor to the *Harvard Business Review*, and the author of *The Unwritten Rules: The Six Skills You Need to Get Promoted to the Executive Level.* John, thanks for being here.

John Beeson: Thanks, Marianne. It's a pleasure to be with you and with LifeWorks.

Host: You wrote in a *Harvard Business Review* article for managers last year that chronic problems with delegation can cripple your team's productivity and impede your own career success. What are some common misperceptions that managers have about delegating?

John Beeson: Well as a starting point, some managers think of delegation as having either an on or an off switch. And by that I mean they think they either need to delegate everything to all direct reports in all situations or not at all. That prevents them from thinking clearly about where they should look to delegate tasks to their direct reports and by contrast where they still need to be involved. And it becomes a barrier to flexing their

approach to delegation to the particular direct reports and the task at hand. Finally, some managers think that if they choose to delegate something, they should never be involved at a detailed level.

Host: No one does the job exactly the way you would, right? Is that partly why is delegating is so difficult for many managers?

John Beeson: It's definitely one of the stumbling blocks. And keep in mind that as a manager of a group, there are almost certainly tasks that you know how to do better than any member of your staff. That's how you got to be the manager. However, you have to be able to delegate some of those tasks or decisions if you are going to devote your time and your attention to the right issues and also help your staff members grow professionally. It can be a very difficult balance for a manager to achieve. On one hand, you do want to maintain standards in terms of the quality of the results that your team produces. However, the style in which people do the task may well differ from exactly how you would do it. And in many cases that's all right, as long as the results that are achieved meet those levels of quality that are required.

Host: So let's talk about how to delegate effectively. Could you share some tips with us?

John Beeson: Let me describe four steps that I find are really useful in delegating. Your starting point for delegating to your staff should flow out of your answers to two fundamental questions. The first question is: Where can I as a manager add the greatest

value to the organization? Where should I be spending the bulk of my time, what are the issues that I need to devote time to that I should get involved in deeply? And it's important to be specific when you answer that question. By contrast, what are the tasks, what are the issues where you should be spending less of your time? The second question that I think is vital is, What skills do I need on my team for us as a team to accomplish our goals but also for me to play that value-oriented role that I've outlined? Because I find that the answers to those two questions will point you in the right direction as you seek to delegate more to staff.

Secondly, take some time to evaluate each of your direct reports in terms of their capacity to operate more autonomously. Who are the team members who have the skills and the experience level that allows you to stretch them and give them more responsibility? Who are the talented people who may be relatively new in their jobs but can get up the learning curve quickly with some coaching and guidance? Lastly, who are the team members who, even with coaching, will need ongoing guidance and handholding? I find it very useful to think about staff members in terms of where they are on a learning curve for their job because I find that that allows you to shape your approach to delegation.

Based on that evaluation of your staff members' capabilities, you're in a position to take the third step -- to adjust your approach to delegation based on where the individual staff member is on his or her learning curve. With someone who's relatively new in the job or new to the particular task, it's quite appropriate to be directive in laying out the nature of the task and to how things are to be done, because by definition things are new to

the person. For the more capable person that you want to give more responsibility and autonomy, I suggest you focus your conversation less on the how they should approach the task and more on the what and the why. Lay out what their level of authority is. Are you asking them to make a decision, to come back to you with a recommendation for you to approve or your boss to approve? Who do they need to touch base with within the organization? And what are your expectations for communication during the course of the effort? How frequently do you expect updates? What are the particular topics or issues that you especially want to be briefed on as they're doing the task?

The fourth step is to negotiate expectations regarding key milestones, check points, project reviews, and so forth. As a general rule of thumb, you want to have more frequent check-ins with those on your staff who are greener or who are new to the staff and less frequent ones with your more experienced people. Encourage your staff to be proactive in informing you of the things you need to know as the initiative evolves. Also, let them know that if they're hitting roadblocks, that they can come to you for help in thinking ways to get around those to move things forward.

Host: You talked a bit in your last point about follow through. So how does following up relate to delegation?

John Beeson: Even for your most capable people, you want to have follow-ups at agreed upon points. That way you have an early warning system that lets you know things are falling through the cracks or getting bogged down. Some managers incorporate check-

ins and project updates into their regular team staff meetings, and whenever possible will create metrics and measures that help the team know when things are on track. One benefit I found of doing those updates in a group setting is it creates what I'll call a positive peer pressure, meaning staff members don't want to have to present a report that shows that an important priority is falling behind schedule.

Host: I wanted you to ask about micromanaging. Do you feel there are times when getting very involved in the details makes sense?

John Beeson: Many employees talk about micromanaging in a very negative or pejorative tone. However, as a manager, there absolutely are times when you need to get involved in the details of a major priority to get it back on track, especially when you have special knowledge of the task or need to provide what I call your managerial throw weight to break a log jam. However, when you dive in, it's important to have in mind a game plan to detach yourself at the right moment. So in addition to righting the ship on the particular initiative, you also want to be building the skills of your team so that they can take over again when you extricate yourself from that level of detailed involvement.

Host: What are the biggest benefits to delegating effectively as you see it? What do you gain as a manager, and what do your employees gain?

John Beeson: Well let me start first with the benefit to employees. I find this very interesting, that when it comes to developing staff, many managers tend to think about

sending people out to training programs. However, there's a lot of research that suggests that your best people get the most out of job experiences that stretch them and help them grow. And delegating meaningful responsibility to your staff is one of the best ways to do that. The benefits to you as a manager are twofold. To the extent that delegating effectively allows you to focus your time and attention on the value-added activities that we've talked about, you and your group will produce better results and you will help the organization move forward. Delegating effectively also allows you to demonstrate what I call your bandwidth to senior managers. By that I mean a sense of unused capacity that you can take on increased responsibilities at a higher level in the organization. So if you're known as a micromanager who needs to be involved in every project and issue at a detailed level, senior managers in your organization who make promotional decisions may have a question in their minds about whether you can handle additional responsibility. So the sense of projecting bandwidth via delegation clearly helps you position yourself for an upward promotion when the time is right.

Host: John, thanks for joining us today and for sharing these really helpful strategies for managers.

John Beeson: Well thank you, Marianne, for the opportunity to chat with you and LifeWorks.

Host: We were talking with management consultant John Beeson. Visit his website at BeesonConsultingInc.com and follow him on twitter @johnrbeeson. On LifeWorks.com, be sure to look for the helpful article *Learning to Delegate.* Thank you for listening.

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