

October-November 2011 — The Art of Delegating



How can you become a better delegator?

That's a topic that I have been giving a lot of thought to lately because, increasingly, I am being hired to provide delegation-skills classes for managers in my clients' organizations.

One of the reasons, as you well know, is that managers are being asked to do more with less—and it doesn't look like this trend is going to change any time soon.

The good news is that by learning to be a good delegator, you can ease the pressure, and help your employees grow, learn, and be successful in their jobs.

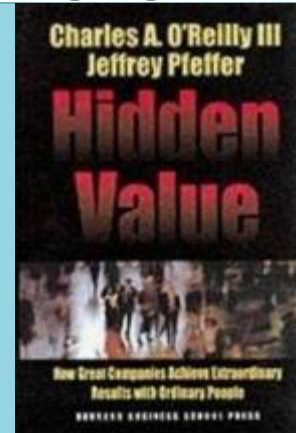
Of course, no one is going to do any job just as you would. So the challenge becomes managing your tolerance for people doing a task in their own way. And yes, sometimes that means that they'll make mistakes. While this is a difficult reality, there are ways to deal with it successfully. Scroll down for more.

At right, you'll find a Q&A with Jeffrey Pfeffer, co-author of the Harvard Press book, "Hidden Value: How Great Companies Achieve Extraordinary Results with Ordinary People." This was initially published in the *Harvard Business Review*, and I found it so timely that we got permission to reprint it here.

For more management tips, I invite you to check out my monthly column in [Be Inkandescent Magazine](#), the online publication for entrepreneurs, by entrepreneurs. To sign up for a free subscription, [click here](#).

Here's to your successful delegating! If you have any questions, feel free to send me an [email](#).

— Alice Waagen, PhD, *president and founder*,
[Workforce Learning, LLC](#)



From Harvard Management Update
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Managers' common reluctance to delegate responsibility is a topic that has long intrigued **Jeffrey Pfeffer**, coauthor of [Hidden Value: How Great Companies Achieve Extraordinary Results with Ordinary People](#).

Pfeffer says that there is mounting evidence that giving people more responsibility for making decisions in their jobs generates greater productivity, morale, and commitment. Yet despite these benefits, many managers are reluctant to cede control. We recently asked Pfeffer, whose research helps explain the reasons for such reluctance, what companies can do to overcome it.

1. What is the most effective step companies can take to encourage managers to delegate more responsibility?

One of the primary ways we learn is by observing what people around us do. So, if I want you to delegate more and micromanage less, then I need to

Delegation: Developing Others Through Shared Work

By Alice Waagen
[Workforce Learning](#)

The relentless downsizing of the past few years has resulted in simply too few people to do the required work. Good managers typically feel responsible to respond to ever-increasing demands by personally taking on more of the work themselves.



And what do they get in the way of relief? More help? An increased budget to hire outside contractors? No, they get sent to delegation training, where I see them in my delegation-skills classes.

Needless to say, I sometimes spend the first part of the class just letting them vent their frustrations.

Then, we come up with new ideas on ways to successfully share their workload with others. In fact, during a recent delegation class at a mid-sized financial services firm, I received some additional insight into the reasons that managers find delegation so difficult.

When I asked what was getting in the way of them delegating work, the managers in my class explained: "This organization has zero tolerance for errors and mistakes. If work is not done perfectly, not only is the staff person who did the work severely reprimanded, but the manager who delegated the work is also considered a failure. A simple error with broad impact can haunt a manager for years."

Fear of negative repercussions causes these folks to delegate only routine, administrative tasks, since even when not done perfectly, mistakes in this area have little negative impact on them or their team.

A critical part of delegation is how you handle mistakes.

Mistakes will inevitably happen when a person is doing work they have never done before. But mistakes, when corrected in a positive way, result in learning and growth. And when there is little tolerance for errors, a person's learning will be shallow.

Without delegation, however, the staff members will not grow in terms of developing skills, and they will have fewer opportunities to stretch their ability to work together. The work will become routine, and only a few key people will possess specialized skills.

reflect that in my own behavior. The first place every manager looks to determine the most appropriate way to act is at their superiors.

2. How do you persuasively describe the value of delegating to a subordinate?

I don't think one "describes" the value of delegation, at least as a way of changing behavior. The best thing to do is some form of experiential exercise in which people are "shown" the benefits of delegation and the costs of not doing so. Some of those exercises involve problem-solving exercises in which people learn that not accessing the expertise of others leads to worse solutions. Some of the exercises involve having people be supervised. The most powerful is called "star power" and has people experience what it is to be powerless—something that provokes strong reactions, to put it mildly. Believe me, "telling" people the benefits of delegation has no effect at all, as the failure to follow the advice of the numerous books and articles that do just that attests.

3. Is organizational structure a factor?

Absolutely. It affects behavior in two ways. First, it sends signals to managers about the type of behavior the organization finds most acceptable. For example, in a relatively flat organizational structure where there are few management layers and managers have broad spans of control, people understand that delegation is the norm. Second, in a very real sense, structure either facilitates or hinders delegation by the nature and strength of the boundaries it erects.

One way companies can compel increased delegation is to assign managers larger staffs and more responsibility. The larger a manager's staff becomes, the less he/she will be able to micromanage them.

4. Is there too much focus being placed on leadership?

Yes, and the problem extends beyond companies to include the business

When learning and growth are suppressed, organizational knowledge atrophies—and as a result when key talent vacates, work comes to a standstill because the knowledge and skill-set leave with the individual. This is a real recipe for disaster.

Here are ways to grow your mistake-tolerance:

When I hear about an organization challenged with delegating work, I propose that leaders look first at how they react to mistakes and failures before they assume that delegation training is needed. If the real culprit is dealing with errors, I suggest that they work on growing mistake-tolerance first.

1. When delegating work, have an open discussion at the outset on the trouble areas or tension points that need close monitoring.

- Ask, where are the errors and mistakes likely to occur? Then decide how to set workarounds to mitigate the impact of the errors.
- Create a "Plan B" for each trouble area.
- Encourage thinking that perfects ways to mitigate mistakes, rather than focusing on ways to prevent them.
- In today's chaotic workplaces, all rocks in the road cannot be anticipated. Look to improve reactive skill-sets.

2. Rigorously conduct debriefings on lessons learned.

- Capture successes to ensure that they are replicated.
- Ask how things could have been done differently.
- Highlight success as resiliency in recovery from unanticipated challenges, rather than focusing on never making mistakes.

3. Be careful to also manage delegated work up and sideways.

- Before giving work to another, identify the key stakeholders in that work's process and output. Ask who will be affected by this work or project.
- Bring these critical stakeholders into the delegation process so that they know who is managing the work and what safeguards are in place to monitor progress and deal with problems.
- If one of the stakeholders is troublesome, know that you will

press, but that's another story. If your organization venerates heroic leaders, then your managers are going to have a natural reluctance to delegate responsibility.

One of the ways companies encourage heroic leaders is by providing them with a host of highly visible trappings, from elegant offices and reserved parking to executive dining rooms and travel on private jets. It's frequently difficult for managers with such perks to entrust responsibility to subordinates whose trappings are significantly inferior to their own.

Organizations in which the spirit of delegating prevails tend to be those with an egalitarian culture that is manifested in such things as open office arrangements and the lack of status symbols. These help build the sense among workers that they are relatively equal.

5. Can recruiting be employed to encourage delegation?

This is another important step that companies can take. Hiring people who are by nature autocratic will certainly mitigate against building an organization that values teamwork.

How do you determine a candidate's management style? Unquestionably, the most reliable predictor is past behavior. Management style reflects a certain mindset and therefore is difficult to change. So companies should look carefully at the ways candidates have approached their responsibilities at their prior employers.

Related to past performance is the nature of the management environment in the organizations where the candidate has worked. If they fared well in an organization that's known to be team-driven, then they'll likely be comfortable with delegating responsibilities in their new role.

[Click here to buy the book.](#)

whom you've assigned the work.

The Bottom Line

I truly believe that delegation is a powerful tool not only to get more work done, but to develop the "bench strength" over time for more fluidity and an even distribution of work. Healthy delegation grows the power of the workforce. Lack of delegation produces stagnancy and disengaged employees. Which would you prefer?

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