



Training and Delegation – Sink or Swim?

Almost everyone that I have worked with has come to the realisation that they can't do everything themselves – and I trust that is not a revelation for you. However, it's one thing to recognise that you must rely on other people and it's another thing to successfully hand over tasks to someone else. If you have experienced frustration with people who just don't get it – or can't do it as well as you – please read on.....

Let's start with a fundamental principle. If you are only prepared to hand over tasks to people who can do it better than you (today) then you will be left with a lot of tasks to do. I suggest that the cut-off is 75% not 100%. In other words, if someone else is capable of performing the task at least 75% as well as you today, let them do it. With the right guidance, support and experience that 75% will quickly grow towards 100% and perhaps (much to your amazement) they will one day perform the task better than you can!

The challenge is to provide the right level and style of guidance and support. I hope that most readers have recognised that the “sink or swim” approach is unlikely to be effective. Trial and error can provide helpful education but it can be very expensive. In the balance of this column I would like to suggest some communication tips that may result in a better outcome and a more enjoyable experience.

In terms of the communication challenges, it doesn't matter too much whether the task is a “one-off” opportunity or whether it will be a permanent component of the person's role. For ease of reference, let's assume that the two people involved are the person explaining the task, someone who has a good understanding - “the Delegator” - and the person receiving instructions, someone who has less experience with the task – “the Learner”. Let's look at the communication required from the Delegator in three stages:

At the Beginning

The first step is easily overlooked in the Delegator's enthusiasm to hand over the task. It is important that the Delegator correctly positions the task – from the Learner's perspective. A great way to do this is for the Delegator to begin by explaining why it is valuable for the Learner to understand and undertake the task. In other words, what's in it for the Learner? Once that is established the Delegator should provide some context for the task and then explain the steps involved. The Delegator's primary responsibility is to ensure that the Learner understands. After completing the explanation, a poor (but popular) question the Delegator may ask is “OK, any questions?” A much more effective question for the Delegator to pose is “What aspect would you like me to go over again?”



During the Task

I hope that you will agree that when the Learner is first attempting the task the objective is for it to be completed successfully - in a manner that enhances the relationship between the Delegator and the Learner. How can the Delegator monitor and support the Learner in a way that builds trust and mutual respect? I would recommend that the approach be agreed up front, in which case the Delegator should ask the Learner something like “How would you like me to support you in this task?” (not “Will you be OK?”). As a minimum, some agreement on when and how to seek input should be established so the Delegator should ask the Learner something like “How often would you like to check in with me?” (not “Let me know if you have a problem”).

When it comes time to review progress the Delegator should monitor both time and quality. In terms of the former, one suggestion is “How much progress have you made?” (not “When will it be finished?”). In terms of the latter, one suggestion is “What steps have you taken to check your work?” (not “Is it right?”).

At the End

When the initial task is completed there is a great opportunity to learn from the experience. For the Learner, some feedback on their performance from the Delegator would be valuable. And let’s not forget feedback for the Delegator. They should be prepared to seek feedback from the Learner on the manner in which they explained and supervised the task. Suitable questions might be “What did you like about the way I supported you?” and “What would you like me to differently next time?” (not “was that OK?”).

These are the best of times to pass on responsibilities to other people. If you can get it right you can help other people to learn and grow, as well as free up some time for yourselves.