

To delegate or not to delegate

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Introduction

There is very little success that one can achieve single handedly – success is usually a team effort and therefore to delegate and involve others contributes immensely to the outcome of a project or a day's work.

To delegate is defined as to "entrust (a task or responsibility) to another person, typically one who is less senior than oneself" implying that "she must delegate duties so as to free herself for more important tasks".¹¹ A better understanding lies in the synonyms of the word delegate namely assign, entrust, pass on, transfer.

In the healthcare environment, it is nearly impossible not to delegate. The workload in the care and treatment of patients and the management of healthcare systems forces the professional nurse and the nurse manager, in particular, to involve the team to ensure quality outcomes. There are only a limited number of hours in a day and only a limited amount of work that one person can perform during working hours. One of the ways to overcome the pressure of your workload is to learn to delegate effectively. Delegating is an important skill and the only way to build a strong and successful team. It is also very important to remember Mackay's Moral: "If you don't climb the mountain, you can't see the view".⁹

Delegation is one of the most important management skills. It is also effective in developing staff, in succession planning and also in personal development. The development of critical thinking skills is extremely important in the successful development of staff and delegating is one of the tools one can use.

To delegate or not to delegate

To delegate or not to delegate is an important decision to make and the answer lies in the following:

- The challenge in delegating is to choose the right task to delegate. Improving your delegating skills is therefore crucial if you want to manage your time more effectively.
- The timeline or deadline determines if there is sufficient time to do the job or perform the task. On a very tight schedule there is not always time to correct mistakes or to do proper coaching. The consequences of not meeting deadlines will guide the decision "*to delegate or not to delegate*".
- The accuracy or the expectations for the task are important in understanding the consequences of the decision and if the available resources are able to perform the task or not. How would the outcome of the task influence related tasks and can you afford not to have a perfect outcome?
- The recurrence of similar tasks/work in the future will determine the importance of delegating or not.
- Tasks critical for long-term success cannot always be delegated and need your input and attention.
- Remember that to delegate takes a lot of upfront effort, but through identifying the abilities of the team and giving them opportunities to grow, you will free up time to enable you to fulfil other higher level functions.

How to delegate

- The outcome/task must be clearly specified to those assigned to perform it.
- Identify the people you can trust to perform the task and deliver quality outcomes.
- Explain the reasons for the job/task being delegated as well as the reasons for delegating it to the specific person/team. The relevance to their current job and the importance of the task/work must clearly be understood by the person/team.
- Discuss the resources needed to successfully complete the task/work. Equipment, people and materials are but

a few resources that might be needed to perform the job.

- Establish controls and identify limits to the work to be performed.
- Agree timelines for the task/work. Develop a system to determine the progress of the delegated task/work.
- Inform the rest of the staff of the new responsibilities of the person/team and the reason for choosing the person/team to perform the task/work.
- Provide support and continuous guidance especially if the task/work is unknown to those identified to perform it.
- Measure the progress through focusing on the achievement of the goals.
- When the task/work is completed give recognition to the team members, realise the importance of the team members and those that supported them.

To whom should you delegate?

Delegation helps team members to grow and to develop a team that can reach its full potential.

Delegation does not mean that one can delegate just everything or anything to anyone. It is important to consider the following:

- You must trust those to whom you delegate.
- Choose the best person/team to do the task/work, those who are self-motivated and enthusiastic and can work with limited supervision.
- The current workload of the person. It might be necessary to allocate some of the person's current duties to another person to ensure ample time to attend to the new tasks.
- The knowledge and skills of the person to perform the specific task. Assess the ability of the person/s as well as the training needs.
- The interest of the person in the proposed area of work.
- It is important to realise that work can be delegated to all members of your team, the level of delegating will differ but time must be spent to improve each staff member's skills. Delegate smaller tasks to newer staff, this will build their confidence and competence.
- Delegating must be part of the performance management strategy and therefore included in the personal development plan of all staff members.

The principles of delegating

To delegate successfully careful consideration must be given to the purpose of delegating. The principles of delegating include the following:

- Choose what tasks you are willing to delegate. Never delegate something you're not willing to do yourself.
- Communicate the desired outcome clearly and the ultimate goal of the task/work to be the focus of the communication. Take time to explain what is expected

from them, the goals and the timelines and deadlines of the task/work. Agree on a schedule for checking the progress. It is always helpful to put everything in writing or provide guidelines or a template.

- The person/team must realise that they must report any problems and that they must ask if there is any uncertainty or any questions to ask as the task/work progresses.
- Delegate the entire task/work, this will ensure that the person/team realise their responsibility and will allow for improved competency and skills.
- Understand the principle that one can delegate some responsibilities, but one can't delegate accountability. This principle can therefore not be separated from the understanding of the lines of authority as well as the understanding of the responsibilities being delegated and the accountability that remains with oneself.
- It is also important to remember that to successfully delegate one must identify the person/s closest to the task as they have the most knowledge of the task and efficiency will be increased.
- Adequate support, such as resources and time, must be provided with continuous communication as well as monitoring of the process and feedback on the progress of the task/work. Maintain open lines of communication.
- Recognise achievements and progress in focusing on the results. Allow the person delegated to control his or her own work methods and work processes as it facilitates success and trust.
- Don't allow the person to refer the task back to you. Assist the person and ensure that he/she realises that the responsibility to complete the tasks remains with them.
- If you are not satisfied with the progress and/or the results, do not do the task yourself. Continue to assist the person/team and ensure that they know that the task/work is their responsibility.
- Spend time with the person/team. Remain in control of the task/work and keep to the timelines and deadlines. Motivate the person/team through support but also through recognising their achievements.
- "A simple delegation rule is the SMARTER acronym; it is a quick checklist for proper delegation. Delegated tasks must be:
 - Specific
 - Measurable
 - Agreed
 - Realistic
 - Time-bound
 - Ethical
 - Recorded"⁵

How to accept the completed work

- It is important to take time to review the completed work/task thoroughly.

- Only accept good quality and completed work, this is the only way that learning takes place. The reason for delegating is to empower people and to reduce your workload. By accepting anything other than a quality product none of these goals is met.
- Recognise quality work and compliment the person/team on their achievements. Recognition and reward will build the person/team's self-confidence and efficiency.
- The time spent to give feedback and to thoroughly discuss the process followed will pave the way for the next task/project to be delegated.^{1,8}

Summary

To delegate or not to delegate are not words to be ignored. In any healthcare environment it is vital for a manager, a team leader or a project leader to fully understand the value of delegating. It can't be emphasised enough that delegating is the most powerful management tool if utilised correctly. The most difficult aspect is to cross the barrier and to start delegating, thereafter to trust those performing the job, and then to walk the path of only assisting, correcting but not taking over the job, and lastly recognising and rewarding all the team members.

Always keep in mind the words of Harvey Mackay: "The most successful managers aim to make themselves unnecessary to their staff".⁹

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