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The Effective Leader Learns to Delegate

how many times have you seen a fire officer running around like a chicken with its head cut off trying to do 10 things at once? Sad to say, this picture reappears on a frighteningly frequent basis.

Far too many officers of every type and kind battle the minutia that makes up their job. They have not learned the simple lesson that can release them from the bondage of fear, frustration and failure. That simple lesson is called delegation.

This whole process is based upon a basic premise: no one among us has the time or the skills to do everything. This might ruffled the ego feathers of some among us — those whom I might generously call “know-it-alls.”

In his text *The 25 Most Common Problems in Business* (Broadman & Holman Publishers, Nashville, TN, 1996, page 72), Jim Zaboloski lists some simple steps for delegation:

1. Give someone else the responsibility.
2. Create a means of accountability.
3. Provide them with the authority to do their job.

— In the 10th edition of their classic text *Organizations: Behavior, Structures, Processes*, James L. Gibson, John M. Ivancevich, James H. Donnelly Jr. and Robert Konopaske define delegation of authority as the “process of distributing authority downward in an organization.” They go on to define authority as an “individual’s right to make decisions.” (McGraw-Hill Higher Education, New York, 2000, page 339.)

Another word to describe what the leader is really doing is sharing. In a given situation there might be 10 simultaneous tasks that must be accomplished to complete a given project. One person can do 10 things, but no one can do more than one thing at a time. Since starting certain tasks may be contingent on completing certain other tasks, you can begin to see where a failure to delegate can lead to organizational chaos.

Delegation cannot go on in a vacuum. Leaders must take great pains to grow their people in such a way that they come to know more. Leaders must also insure that

their people are able to develop confidence in their ability to work independently. What good is it to delegate a wide array of tasks to people who lack the skill and confidence to act independently of their leaders?

Staff development involves equal parts of education, training and trust. You must provide your people with the skills and talents necessary to operate within your fire department. At a certain point, which only you can determine, you begin assigning simple tasks to the troops. Be available to answer questions, but step back and let these people try their wings.

Expect failures. You must be supportive as your people begin to explore their new role in the world. Do not yell. Do not discourage their efforts to accomplish tasks in a unique manner. None of us begins work as an expert in anything.

You create the environment wherein your people are encouraged to grow as individuals. As the old U.S. Army leadership manual on my shelf states, “Seek responsibility! Take responsibility for your actions.” People will do this if you make it the operational norm within your agency. You must create an organizational environment where your people are encouraged to become “technically and tactically proficient.” (*Military Leadership*, Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington, D.C., June 1973, pages 2-7.)

Be warned, there are a number of reasons why you may end up working for a leader who fails to delegate. Zaboloski lists a few:

1. Their tasks become their security blankets.
2. Distrust and skepticism from outside have crept into the office.
3. An ego the size of Godzilla runs the place.
4. The over-activity they need to delegate keeps them from doing so. (Zaboloski, page 73.)

The first of these statement deals with people I have come to recognize as being very insecure. They have developed expertise in a particular area, and they never want to give that away. They fear a subordinate will do the job better, and that their status will be diminished.

These folks might also feel that they are not able to train their troops to a level sufficient to do the job properly. They realize that this would make them look bad in the eyes of their boss, so they just keep doing what they do best. Unfortunately, in doing this, they leave a load of frustrated followers in their wake.

They also leave a lot of the work undone. However, in their own minds, they are more afraid of being caught with their feet up on the desk, taking a nap. Given their constant state of motion, this eventuality is unlikely.

A leader’s feelings of skepticism about his or her firefighters can bleed over into an unwillingness to delegate tasks to them. They might be considered good enough to

**Creating an
organizational
environment
that encourages
the sharing of
power must
start at the top.**



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