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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

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make the coffee in the morning, but not to select the type of turnout gear that they will wear.

There is one agency that practices the concept of delegation better than any I have seen. The Evesham Township Fire Rescue Department in Burlington County, NJ, has long spread the decisions out among the members. I can recall situations when a firefighter was charged with supervising a critical organizational task.

As the department has grown, its leaders have worked to maintain an environment where individuals are granted great authority and latitude to operate. However, they are not left to their own devices. Their task assignments program has worked well over the past decade. People are given assignments, their actions are monitored and the results of their actions are scrutinized to insure that each task has been completed. When success is achieved, praise flows freely.

It is critical to remember that when you delegate, you do not abdicate your responsibility to insure that your agency functions properly. You are always going to be responsible to insure that you and your associate complete the mission assigned to your organization.

One of the saddest things that I have ever witnessed is the state of organizations in which the leaders had egos so inflated that everyone else had a tough time fitting into the same room as them. These people feel that they are the only ones smart enough to make decisions. Usually these people are living in a fantasy world populated by memories of their past glories.

These people do not converse. They do not communicate or share thoughts. They pontificate. They lecture you as though they are on some high plateau and you are the worthless swine gathered together in the valley below. You are supposed to feel a humble form of gratitude for being allowed the privilege of being in their presence. What a royal pain in the butt these people are. Of course, you should never expect them to delegate the time of day to you.

Sad to say that it is this very unwillingness to give up their grip on everything that leads to their downward spiral. These selfish, ignorant people continually work harder in a vain attempt to do more. The harder they seem to work, the less they seem to accomplish. Their frustration then evolves into organizational paralysis.

The list of tasks to do grows exponentially, until at some point there is a breakdown. There may be an organizational malfunction, such as when a missed task or assignment leads to injury, death, deep embarrassment or a heavy financial impact to correct the omission. It might also be that the individuals involved suffer mental breakdowns and lose control of themselves or their organizations, or both. Neither of these is a good thing. Neither is a pretty sight.

Creating an organizational environment that encourages the sharing of power must start at the top. If the upper echelons are not sharing, that makes it difficult for the levels further down the food chain to accomplish delegation. Note that I said hard, not impossible.

There are some decisions that you can never, or at least should never, pass off to others. Zabloski shares the following suggestions:

1. Items that could affect the life of the organization.
2. Items of great confidentiality.
3. Items that only you are trained to do.
4. Items that you want to pass the buck on.
5. Items of legality. (Zabloski, page 74.)

Certain things can kill an organization. Decisions to spend more money than you have or to hire more people than you can afford can be ruinous. Decisions that lead to people being killed or maimed can also have fatal financial consequences. If you have people who are trained and whom you truly trust, then you may delegate critical task, but be sure to set up an appropriate oversight mechanism.

How often have you heard it said that if you want to keep a secret, don't tell anybody? I can recall many instances where people in the military would not share information with me because I lacked "a need to know." Most of the time, that whole thing was simply a crock.

In far too many cases, the same thing happens in the fire service. People keep secrets because it makes them feel important. Management doesn't want the union to know that it intends to do some shady stuff. Labor has its secrets that would cause life, as we now know it, to cease if management uncovered its slick plans.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is so little that must be kept secret in the day-to-day affairs of the American fire service that to use secrecy as an argument is by and large not necessary. Precious little in the fire service

must be closely held. I must add, however, that there are a number of items that should remain sensitive. They should be handled delicately. Perhaps the figures from a sealed bid shouldn't be shared. Most certainly the results of a private personnel action should be kept quiet, and if you suspect someone of a criminal action, do not go on cable TV to announce your suspicions. These are some of the rare events that should not be delegated or shared. You may wish to seek legal advice to guide you in this area. Unfortunately, far too many people will use confidentiality as an excuse to keep from sharing thoughts, ideas and concepts.

It may be that there are those things that only you are trained to do. In this case, it would make no sense to give the job to someone else. However, I want you to pause and think about this situation for a moment. Why are you the only one trained to do a job? None of us is that important. What if you get killed or disabled in a motor vehicle accident? Suppose you are suddenly hospitalized and expected to be out of work for months? What then?

I suggest that if you are the only one trained for anything, the time to start training your replacement and a number of associates is right now. Set aside some time to create a list of things that only you can do. Then create a list of people who can be trained to do each task. Once you have done this, start the process of education and edification. Your organization will be stronger for your efforts.

There are certain things that many people could do or are trained to do, but for which you are directly responsible. Discipline is just such a critical area. You cannot delegate the disciplining of a subordinate. How would it look if you sent one of your firefighters a note that said, "Go into the restroom, face the mirror, look yourself directly in the eye and then yell at yourself for 10 minutes"?

There may be a temptation to pass this one along. Avoid it. Do not ask someone else to do what could easily be seen as your dirty work. Do not succumb to the temptation to pass the buck on this one.

Lastly, do not try to duck the legal requirements of your position. A growing number of areas of the law apply directly to the operation of your fire department. This will vary from state to state. I would suggest that you familiarize yourself with all of the laws that may apply to your agency. The following are some of the laws with which to contend in New Jersey:

- Mandatory live-fire legislation
- Mandatory incident command legislation
- Mandatory accountability legislation
- Mandatory respiratory protection legislation
- Mandatory right-to-know legislation

The leader of any fire department organization in New Jersey is mandated to operate according to the provisions of these laws and others. You can delegate the training and record-keeping authority to someone else, but you can never delegate the responsibility for insuring compliance with law.

It would be my suggestion that every organization could benefit from an increased awareness of and emphasis on the concept of delegating authority. I ask you to fight the urge to do it all yourself. If have tried this method, and found it wanting, learn to delegate before you are devoured by the details.

Imagine!

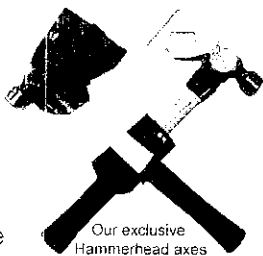
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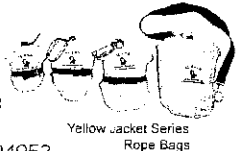


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