

Become a Masterful  
Delegator:  
5 Pillars of Highly Successful  
Delegation For Leaders and  
Executives

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## Introduction

Would it surprise you to know that “sharing leadership/ delegation skills” was cited as one of the top 3 biggest challenges for senior leaders? These were the results of a 2013 study of CEOs and Senior Executives, conducted by Stanford University.

Many of the leaders I work with have yet to truly experience the significant benefits of delegation. As a matter of fact, there have only been a handful of executives in my career who were known to be master delegators.

So if you know that you have room to grow in this area, don't worry, most other leaders trying to overcome the same challenges.

### **Here's the good news:**

We can all take proactive steps to delegate more effectively.

This White Paper will explore the principles of delegation and provide practical application for one of the most significant tools in a leader's toolbox. We'll conclude with several actionable steps or techniques you can implement to enhance your skill in this area.

As Peter Drucker said,

*“No good leader puts off to tomorrow what they can delegate today.”*

Effective delegation is one of the top strategies I recently wrote about in a book entitled, [Success In The C-Suite: Top Seven Strategies for Extraordinary Achievement](#).

If you are in a leadership role, you obviously can't accomplish all that needs to be done on your own. This is the sole reason why you have staff.

It has been said, **“A leader's job is to focus on doing the right things and a manager's job is to focus on doing things right.”** A key aspect of your role as a “Master Delegating Leader” is to maximize the performance of those on your team, to ensure the right things get done.

You have a responsibility for effectively utilizing the assets under your control, including physical, financial, and human assets. The greater your leadership role within

an organization, the greater are your goals to move the organization forward. Subsequently, the more work you have on your plate, the less likely you are using your staff effectively. **Also, the more work you have on your plate, the less time there is to think strategically about the future and become aware of key trends that may represent significant opportunities.**

This role of thinking strategically is arguably one of the most important for a senior leader today.

If you don't allow adequate, intentional time for this, you will only be reacting – unique and critical opportunities may pass you by because you are too busy working rather than thinking strategically about the business.

Think about it – the more you are “doing” the less time you have for things only a leader should be really be spending their time on, namely:

- Strategic thinking
- Empowering your staff
- Setting the vision for the organization

When you have your head down doing the work others can do, you can't be ensuring others are appropriately focused; you can't recognize opportunities; you can't develop the people underneath you.

Many of the leaders I have worked with have expressed the stress and frustration associated with working long hours. When we talk about this in some depth, often it can come down to less frequent use of delegation as the powerful tool it can be.

**As a leader, your role is to focus on getting the right things done.**

Therefore, don't be overly concerned about *how* the work gets done, only that the desired outcome or result is achieved. **Delegation is a powerful, yet often underutilized tool the leader can utilize to empower and develop people on their team.**

For delegation to achieve the powerful results possible, it requires a high level of trust and confidence in the person you are delegating to for it to be as successful as possible.

Additionally, you must be able to clearly articulate the desired outcome you are looking to achieve. You don't need to focus or even plan out the steps to get there; that's what a capable "delegate" will be able to do. You must master this if you want to become a leader who achieves extraordinary success.

## **Principles of Becoming a Master Delegator**

1. Understanding the reasons to delegate
2. Delegation requires forethought
3. Be aware of those who want to delegate up
4. Complete delegation holds people accountable for results
5. Master the 80/20 principle

## **Pillar 1: Understanding The Reasons To Delegate**

There are two primary reasons to delegate:

- Productivity
- Employee development

Delegating for productivity occurs when you ensure that a given task is performed by the lowest paid person who is capable of successfully performing said task or assignment.

**Notice there are two essential points in that last sentence:** “the lowest paid person ***and*** that person must be capable of successfully performing the task”.

An important point here is to realize the person you can delegate to does not have to be fully capable right now; rather, it is understood they have the potential to be fully capable with some level of coaching, training or other learning.

If you are paid \$100 per hour and your Assistant is paid \$40 per hour and is fully capable of performing the assignment, obviously the assignment should be delegated, even if you like doing this work! The additional benefit to you (and the organization that pays you) is that you can use that time saved on brainstorming or some other high level task that only you can or should do.

Delegating for employee development occurs when you invest some time (or enable the investment of time by another) to develop the skills of one of your employees so that they can perform a recurring task (analysis of the department spending each month) or new assignment (research the competitive strategies in your industry).

By investing your time in teaching, coaching, and developing your employee, you have allowed the employee to gain some new, valuable skills, encouraged an employee, and given them the opportunity to be more fully engaged, thereby driving up loyalty, performance and efficiency.

This also represents an opportunity to develop a better and deeper relationship with your employee. It's truly a win-win.

## **Does This Sound Familiar?**

The typical objection or pushback to delegation is, “It will be faster if I just do it myself” or “it will take me longer to explain it to someone than to just do it myself”. Sound familiar?

The problem with following this logic is that nothing changes, nothing improves, and you are still faced with a lot of items on your to-do list, causing you frustration and stress. You haven’t increased productivity or developed someone – you have maintained the status-quo and continued on with business as usual (always a red flag!)

To drive the point further, you have actually deprived yourself and your organization the benefit of allowing you more time to think or brainstorm, attend to something that only you should be doing or having higher level conversations with other executives or key business prospects. Additionally, you have not given the opportunity for others to be better engaged or develop that sense of loyalty.

In short, your to-do list grows longer every day!

## **Pillar 2: Delegation Requires Forethought**

Before one can delegate, the successful leader thinks through some important aspects:

- **Clearly identify the outcome of the assignment or task you would like to delegate.** As mentioned earlier, if you are not able to clearly explain the desired outcome, the person you are delegating to will not likely be able to successfully complete the assignment to your satisfaction.
- **Select the person who can best perform this and learn the most.** You may have to train the person, provide them with some additional skill, information, context or other considerations. This should not stop you from delegating in the first place. Think back on your own experience as a younger or more inexperienced manager – someone invested some time in you to teach you a new skill or technique to get something done. You are now in the role of teacher when it comes to delegation. Yes, this is an investment of your time – the return on that investment can be significant because you are developing a person to be of greater value to you.
- **Be careful not to delegate the same assignment to multiple people.** There is more on this in the Practical Application section that follows. As appropriate, when the assignment requires multiple people to execute it, bring the entire group into the same meeting to discuss the assignment or project you have in mind. Be sure to identify a clear point person who will ultimately be accountable to you for the overall results.
- **When thinking of the person who can best perform the assignment consider:**
  - their knowledge and skill level
  - how this assignment may help them expand or develop their competencies
  - their development track for future positions and whether this assignment will help them be more ready for a future role

- **Decide on the authority level you will give to the person** (see the next section below for guidance here).
- **Identify performance metrics and check-in points.** The larger the assignment, or the greater the impact of the end result, the more you will want to ensure the person to whom you delegate the assignment is on track with your expectations, hence, the greater the need for regular check-ins to insure the actual outcome will achieve the desired results.
- **Determine that you will allow the person to develop their own approach and technique for achieving the desired outcome** so that you don't become a micro-manager.
- **Identify how you will hold the person accountable for results.**

Michael Hyatt, the former CEO of Thomas Nelson Publishing wrote a blog post (<http://michaelhyatt.com/the-five-levels-of-delegation.html>) on delegation. He explains levels of authority that can be considered when delegating an assignment to one of your team members:

As a leader, whenever you delegate a task, you need to make it clear what level of authority you are conferring to others:

- **Level 1: Do exactly what I have asked you to do.** Don't deviate from my instructions. I have already researched the options and determined what I want you to do.
- **Level 2: Research the topic and report back.** We will discuss it, and then I will make the decision and tell you what I want you to do.
- **Level 3: Research the topic, outline the options, and make a recommendation.** Give me the pros and cons of each option, but tell me what you think we should do. If I agree with your decision, I will authorize you to move forward.



- **Level 4: Make a decision and then tell me what you did.** I trust you to do the research, make the best decision you can, and then keep me in the loop. I don't want to be surprised by someone else.
- **Level 5: Make whatever decision you think is best.** No need to report back. I trust you completely. I know you will follow through. You have my full support.

Given all of the above considerations, you may come to the conclusion it is more time efficient if you do the task or assignment yourself. But **BEWARE**: This is actually very short term and self-centered thinking! **Remember this, every time you say yes to doing something yourself, you are additionally saying no to doing something else** – something else that could provide more value, have a greater impact or move you closer to your longer term goals.

In his book *The 5 Levels of Leadership*, John Maxwell describes a Level 4 leader as one who develops others.

Delegation is a key tool in accomplishing that development. Delegation is certainly meant to accomplish more; it is also meant to teach someone new skills, techniques and equip them with new tools they can learn and master.

## **Pillar 3: Be Aware Of Those Who Want To Delegate Up**

It is important to note that some of your staff may attempt to delegate “up” to you.

This can occur when an employee describes a problem they are having or obstacle they are facing. In your desire to be a leader who is focused on others, you may be inclined to take on the problem as yours and solve it. Be forewarned – this is a huge mistake.

If you allow this, you are allowing the transfer of the problem to you from its rightful owner, the employee who brought it to you in the first place.

The employee leaves with a sigh of relief and you have just taken on their burden. The employee will never learn how to fix such problems in the future and you have added to your workload – this is not a sustainable formula for achieving extraordinary success as a leader!

***Instead, the extraordinarily successful leader clearly tells an employee who wishes to discuss a problem to do whatever amount of thinking is required prior to this meeting so they are armed with at least three potential solutions.***

In this way, you are not allowing the transfer of the problem to you, rather, you are encouraging the employee to think for themselves and seek your counsel or guidance on what seems to be the best approach.

Effective leaders love to have that kind of discussion with their employees. Develop the habit to respond to an employee who brings in a problem or situation to you with the intention of delegating up by saying, “I have confidence you will figure it out” as they are ready to leave your office.

## **Pillar 4: Complete Delegation Holds People Accountable For Results**

When you delegate, it is important to hold people accountable for the result itself, not the activities or tasks leading to the result. The methods people choose to utilize to achieve the result of course have to be legal, ethical and within the operating guidelines of the organization.

### **This scenario may sound familiar to you:**

You have delegated an assignment to one of your employees to follow up with 'Alice' on such-and-such a deliverable.

You both agree that this should be completed in two days and you have assigned authority level 5, meaning that you trust the employee to follow through completely.

A week later, you learn that the original assignment is still outstanding and you ask the employee for an update. The employee gleefully reports to you that he has sent Alice an email or left her a voicemail message that same day that you spoke.

The gleeful part indicates that he believes has completed his assigned task. In reality, the task has not been completed!

This type of scenario is particularly popular among millennials in the workforce today who rely on technology and many times assume a task has been appropriately followed up because of their one-way communication. It is clear they are thinking "task" and not "outcome". Your role is to ensure they focus on achieving the outcome.

**The effective leader will coach the employee to take full ownership for the assignment** meaning that the task is not complete because the employee has "transferred" the responsibility to Alice simply by sending a one-way message to her. The employee must follow up as many times as needed and in whatever ways are needed to ensure that Alice completes the deliverable, whatever it is. That is a focus on the result, and not the task or activity.

As a leader, you must hold your staff accountable for delivering on the result. You must be committed to implementing consequences – both positive or reward consequences for results that are achieved, and negative or punitive consequences when results are not achieved.

Recently, I was approached by the Board of an organization who have discovered some significant operational and leadership issues in their organization. Having worked with this organization before, they have asked my assistance in conducting an organization-wide assessment to identify strengths, weaknesses and developmental opportunities.

Since I have some experience with this organization, I know the Board members have a difficult time “dealing with any conflict” when having discussions with the leadership of the organization.

Before agreeing to take this assignment, I insisted the Board develop consequences for the leadership should the desired results not be realized. **Dealing with conflict can be challenging for some, however, it must be dealt with proactively if you desire change.** Holding people accountable for results may seem uncomfortable, yet the most successful leaders have learned to do this effectively.

## **Pillar 5: Master The 80/20 Principle**

We are all familiar with this principle – 80% of your results come from 20% of your work. The key is to identify the 20% of your work or the two or three things that predictably will deliver 80% of the results you desire to achieve.

To do this effectively will require some intentional thinking on your part as well as a willingness to change your habits and routines. **This principle works over and over again; it is highly predictable and has stood the test of time.**

Don't buy into the myth of activity equating to results. Activities are just activities. What's important to know is which specific activities produce the highest impact or most profitable results. This is 80/20 in action.

I was recently working with a senior executive with plant manufacturing management responsibility for about \$500 million in product value. Rich indicated this year would be a challenging year financially and he need to identify some ways to be more efficient in the manufacturing operation. We talked about the 80/20 principle and the concept of leading indicators.

Rich was troubled because he would find out 5-7 days into the following month how the plant actually performed financially in the previous month. I asked what some of the leading indicators were which would accurately predict if the monthly numbers would be met, suggesting some simple ones such as reject rates, overtime rates, etc.

As we continued to discuss this topic, my probing continued,

*“What do you think would happen if your three business unit leaders identified the top 10 daily or weekly indicators with the most impact on operational and financial performance? With this list, what would happen if you identified the 2 (20%) having the greatest (80%) impact on the results?”*

Rich's brain was in full calculating mode – I could see this a mile away! After a minute or two he exclaimed, “Bill, you just saved me several million dollars! I know what I need to do and I know what my business unit heads need to do. I'm going to get them thinking about this today and we'll meet about it in a week or so.”

Rich was obviously excited to be able to apply the 80/20 rule in a context he hadn't thought of before. I felt pretty good too as I was able to coach Rich to discover a multi-million dollar impact in just a few minutes of focused conversation.

When delegating, ensure you are the fewest number of things (20%) which can have the greatest impact (80%) on the overall results you are trying to achieve.

## **Practical Application**

The concept of delegation is as old as the hills. The first recorded lesson in delegation goes all the way back to the time of Moses, believe it or not. If you are so inclined, read Exodus, Chapter 18 and you will see how Moses' father-in-law gave him the idea!

**The leader who enjoys extraordinary success has a discipline of asking themselves two questions at regular times throughout the day:**

1. Is what I am spending my time on at this moment the absolute best and most efficient use of my time?
2. Is what I am about to spend my time moving one of my biggest goals forward?

When the answer is yes to both, you can be assured that you are being productive. When the answer is no, it is an opportunity to re-examine your actions against what you have said are your goals and highest priorities.

As a leader, it is important for you to realize when you are brainstorming with your employees and when you are delegating.

A CEO client that I worked with several years ago was incredibly creative; she loved to "think out loud" with her staff on new and different ideas that would propel the business forward. The problem was that the staff, busy executives in their own right, had a difficult time discerning whether their boss was just kicking around some ideas or actually delegating yet another "research" project. This created needless anxiety.

The CEO was exhibiting a competency that she was exceptionally strong in and actually enjoyed, but the staff was confused. I remember coaching both the CEO and members of her senior leadership team that it was OK for them to ask her if she was brainstorming or actually delegating. Once they "had permission" to do this, life was a lot less anxious and much more enjoyable for them all!

**As you consider delegating, take into account the likely obstacles that the employee might encounter in completing the assignment:**

- Have you sufficiently resourced them to accomplish the result?

- Do they have the tools and authority necessary to accomplish the task?
- Have you given them access to information, people, or other resources to deliver on this in a successful manner?
- What is their motivation to complete such an assignment?
- What other priorities or assignments are they working on at present?
- Can they reasonably fit this new assignment into their schedule or might other work need to be postponed?

The last thing you want to do is to load up your highest performing team members with every newly delegated assignment just because of their capability. You will burn them out and you run the risk of them leaving because they are burned out.

I was recently working with hard-charging, Type A senior executive on delegation. In the course of my assessment of this executive, Jeff, I was told by several people on his staff of his apparent habit of delegating the same assignment to multiple staff members, without the others' knowledge, hoping at least one of the few would immediately jump on the assignment and provide Jeff the required information. Needless to say, this was highly inefficient as well as frustrating to the staff.

We talked about it and with some new insight he was receiving in our coaching sessions, he came to understand his strategy was not an effective one. We talked about how to truly delegate effectively, including taking into account someone's existing workload as well as his own "highly urgent" nature to accomplish things and move them along.

Delegating can be a tool to help you become a much better leader. When you delegate effectively, you are able to have your team create and contribute so much more value to your organization. **You will also be developing the skills and competencies of those on your staff, thereby building up the trust they have in you as you are intentional about their ongoing professional development.**

Dan Kennedy has written a book on time management, yet the topic of delegation comes up. He says you have to know the value of your time and know precisely how much your time is worth. **Don't confuse this with how much your organization is paying you.** That may not be an adequate representation of the true value of your time.

Kennedy says having the specific number in mind will by itself "make a drastic change in so many of the decisions you make, habits you cultivate and people you associate with – the benefits will be extraordinary." I have personally done this exercise,



and can confirm without a doubt it is powerful. I am so much more aware of how much money I am spending when I get sucked into doing tasks others should be doing for me.

Perry Marshall has written about the concept of delegating tasks others can do for a lesser amount of an hourly rate. From our discussion above, I hope you will agree tasks have a different value in terms of what they accomplish. For example, the act of scheduling a standard or routine meeting on your calendar might be worth \$10.00 per hour to you, whereas having an insightful conversation with a key business leader or top level prospect for new business who can approve a multi-million dollar deal may be worth \$10,000 per hour!

**He suggests spending some time thinking into and identifying all the tasks you do that fall into one of 4 categories:**

- Those worth \$10 per hour
- Those worth \$100 per hour
- Those worth \$1,000 per hour
- Those worth \$10,000 per hour

To complete the exercise, there will be many, many more items on the \$10 per hour list than on the \$10,000. In fact, those few items that make it onto the \$10,000 list must only be those only you can perform or invest your time in because they have the absolute highest impact to your business or company.

The next step is to figure out who can do all those \$10 and \$100 per hour tasks and delegate those tasks to those people who are or can be capable of doing them for you. If you do this with appropriate foresight, you will be amazed at the time it frees up for you to spend on highly impactful tasks only you can or should be doing.

## **Practical Steps to Becoming A Master Delegator**

As you read through and consider adopting some of these practices, take the opportunity to identify what you will eliminate from your current practice – if you need help in identifying what to eliminate, ask a trusted colleague, professional coach, or advisor who is well versed in this critical aspect of leadership.

**1. Identify work you do that others who are paid less can perform for you, even if they need a little training. Pick at least one task for each member of your team.**

2. Throughout the day, continually ask yourself 2 questions:

a. Is what I am spending my time on at this moment the absolute best and most efficient use of my time?

b. Is what I am about to spend my time moving one of my biggest goals forward?

**3. Identify those \$10 and \$100 hour tasks you are currently performing and develop a plan to delegate ALL of them within the next week to 10 days.**

4. Challenge your managers to identify and delegate ALL \$10 per hour tasks they are currently performing.

**5. Spend regular time with your direct reports to coach them in ensuring they are delegating appropriately.**

6. Seek the insight and advice of your Executive Assistant to determine what else s/he believes you could be delegating to others, as well as those things you shouldn't be doing at all.

**7. Discuss your desired outcome and performance standards, then ask for their commitment; be able to discern if you are receiving commitment, or compliance.**

8. Hold them accountable by reviewing their progress and the final outcome, providing appropriate feedback along the way.

***9. Encourage each of your staff to identify 10% of their job that can be done away with each quarter. This will create time for you to delegate more to them without overloading them.***

10. Review the individual development plan for each of your staff and brainstorm with them items that can be delegated or otherwise assigned to them that would advance their development.

## **A Final Note:**

I sincerely hope these delegation strategies have sparked some new thinking on your part and provided some motivation to apply these to your own leadership situation.

New expectations of higher performance, greater impact, and more influence can't happen just by doing more of what you have been doing. Change must happen and that change begins with you. Seriously consider enlisting the assistance of a well-qualified leadership coach who can help you. It is virtually impossible to do this leadership journey alone.

**If you are interested in discussing coaching with me, please call my office at 864-888-3100.**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Bill Bliss has worked in the areas of Leadership Development, Organization Effectiveness, Staffing and Executive Compensation throughout his 25 year career. Today, he is one of the most sought after executive coaches for senior executives in Eastern part of the United States. He has coached a wide variety of executives including Chief Executive Officers, Presidents, Vice Presidents, General Managers and Directors across many disciplines. He is an Executive Director and Founding Partner of the John Maxwell Team and is a John Maxwell Certified Coach. He is also certified to utilize the Caliper Profile.

Bill has facilitated strategic planning, teambuilding and leadership development sessions for a variety of clients in manufacturing retail, health care, real estate services and construction, publishing, transportation services, financial and professional services and other industries.

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