



Staff Smart, Part 2: Delegation

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Making your staff as capable and productive as they can reasonably be requires good recruitment, the ability to motivate, and a knack for delegating. I wrote about recruitment last year for the Smart IT department (“Smart Staff Recruiting,” Mar./Apr. 2009), and in the last installment of this department, I focused on motivation. Here, I discuss how to successfully delegate responsibilities.

Achieving More by Managing Less

The opposite of “achieving more by managing less” is “achieving less by managing more.” This is a direct consequence of micromanagement—something senior managers should avoid.

Most micromanaging managers are smart and capable. For first-level managers, micromanagement can be a virtue—it often leads to excellent performance and thus earns the manager a fast promotion. Unfortunately, such managers usually can’t give up micromanagement when they move to a higher-level position. Micromanagement ultimately distracts these senior managers from spending adequate time and energy on more important issues, and it demoralizes the staff under their charge. This situation epitomizes the Peter Principle (that is,

every employee tends to rise to his or her level of incompetence) and leads to a triple loss: a loss for the organization, a loss for the senior manager, and a loss for the staff.

Illustrating Example: Micromanagement Hinders Career Advancement

D is a detailed, organized, and competent technical professional. He was an excellent first-level technical manager who knew each of his staff member’s strengths and weaknesses and how each was progressing on projects. He was soon promoted to second-level manager, and although he then oversaw a much larger group, he could still micromanage the staff.

However, when promoted to vice president, his micromanaging style finally came apart at the seams: staff morale was low because his micromanagement caused delays and additional work. For example, business trips now needed his approval, which made the travel-request process take longer. Also, staff used to just informally report on project progress to their direct manager, but now they had to give a formal presentation to the VP. Because of his micromanagement style, D couldn’t find enough time for long-term strategic planning—a critical component of his position. He was relieved of the VP position a few months later.

Illustrating Example: Micromanagement Wastes Energy on Trivial Issues

E was a VP responsible for providing administrative and managerial services for a company of 1,500 employees. His responsibilities included high-budget items—computer-related services and systems and building renovation and maintenance. He rarely, if ever, reported to his boss areas in which he could save the company money, but he once proudly reported that he had figured out how to reduce toilet paper waste. With tens of millions of budget dollars under his care, this “pride” savings was far below the noise level.

He should have focused on more important areas that could have saved the company millions of dollars while providing enhanced services. This case symbolizes the biggest problem with micromanagement—focusing on numerous trivial issues instead of fewer but far more important tasks.

Matching Tasks and People

Delegating is easy, but successful delegation is an art. You need to know when, what, and to whom—the last of which is particularly difficult. The people to whom you delegate tasks must be in sync with your philosophies, have the right skills to excel, and be motivated to succeed. In matching tasks with your staff or other individuals,

keep in mind the b/a rule (such as 80/20, 90/10, or even 99/1), with “a” typically much smaller than “b.” That is, only “a” percent of people are creative and motivated enough for your most challenging tasks. You need to identify these people. As President Reagan once said, “Surround yourself with the best people you can find, delegate authority, and don’t interfere as long as the policy you’ve decided upon is being carried out.”

But you still need the “b” percent of people to carry out other tasks that are comparatively less challenging yet still essential. Keep in mind that almost everyone is willing to take on responsibilities, because people want to feel important and they savor the success of a job well done. Matching the right task to the right person will have this effect. To achieve this, job reassignment among some staff might be necessary.

Illustrating Example: Corporate CIO Benefits from Delegating to Division CIOs

A newly appointed corporate-level CIO noticed that, in spite of monthly division CIO meetings, there wasn’t much cooperation among the CIOs. He reasoned that this was because the meetings were owned and managed by the corporate CIO and his staff. The corporate CIO chaired the monthly meeting, and his staff set the agenda and managed all of the action items. Thus, the division CIOs didn’t have much chance to interact with each other.

The new CIO decided to change this. He started calling the monthly meeting the CIO Council and delegated the council’s management and ownership to the division CIOs. A division CIO was elected by his peers to chair the council. The chair then set the agenda and managed the action items. Staff at the corporate CIO’s

office facilitated the action items but didn’t own or manage them.

The division CIOs were delighted. The ownership of the meeting gave them a psychological boost. More pragmatically, going to the meetings used to be a chore dictated by the corporate CIO, but now it was a platform for collegial discussions about issues of importance to the division CIOs—such as leveraging each others’ expertise and resources and identifying joint projects. In short, by delegating the responsibilities at CIO meetings to division CIOs, the meetings became much more effective, productive, and meaningful, with the added benefit of freeing up some of the corporate CIO’s time. It was a win-win arrangement.

Illustrating Example: Delegating to the Wrong Person

T was a department chair at a university, and G was a bright associate professor in his department. T appointed G to handle matters relating to graduate programs, and G did a good job at the post, except for one problem. Although he was very talented in academic and administration matters, G was also very talented at rubbing people the wrong way. His belligerent personality made him quite unpopular. The faculty’s unhappiness with G propagated to T to the point where almost anything T did was interpreted negatively, so T became equally unpopular. Several key faculty members joined forces and requested that the dean remove T from his position. The dean assented. I’m certain that had T picked a more amiable person for the graduate program administration position, he would have finished the term as planned.

Illustrating Example: Dividing Up Responsibilities Judiciously

People running professional magazines and conferences are

typically volunteers who contribute their time and talent for professional fun or obligation. I’ve run a couple of conferences and magazines quite successfully, if I may say so myself, without having to devote too much of my own time and without having to depend on my limited capability. How? I simply depend on people more capable than myself to help me out. I divide the overall effort into separate tasks and then seek out individuals most suited for these tasks.

When I ran an annual IEEE North Carolina Symposium as its general chair some years ago, I created a PR chair position and invited a friend who was responsible for PR at a large company to be in charge of it. He got two local newspapers to feature the symposium as a business story. I added a job fair to the symposium and asked a very capable HR manager from a local company to plan it. Both actions helped increase attendance. Similarly, I appointed the most-suited people for local arrangement, publications, and the technical program. Finally, I appointed a vice general chair to coordinate with these individuals. I ended up being the first general chair to make money for the symposium. I did so by using other people’s talent without spending too much of my own time. (I’m always amazed when I observe conference organizers trying to handle multiple tasks themselves.)

When I was offered the position of editor in chief for *IT Professional* a little over 10 years ago, I wasn’t sure I was suited for it. I realized that the IEEE Computer Society’s organization was complicated, and I didn’t think I had the right temperament. I needed help from someone with excellent interpersonal skills, experience running a technical magazine, and a personal secretary to help handle correspondence. My friend Frank

Ferrante fit these considerations, and luckily for me, he agreed to help as an associate EIC (AEIC).

Furthermore, the EIC must attend several Computer Society committee meetings a year, and, again, I didn't think I had the temperament for the traveling and for dealing with committees. So, I asked my friend Helen Wood, a former Computer Society president who knew many committee members well, if she would attend meetings on the magazine's behalf. Fortunately for me, she also agreed. Only after both Frank and Helen agreed to serve as AEICs did I formally accept the EIC offer.

However, there was still one hole—the magazine's department section, which contained articles about news and products written by Computer Society paid staff. Because Sorel Reisman had a good rapport with the staff, I asked him to helm the departments, and luckily he agreed. Now the magazine was run by three very talented and skilled people. I held the title of EIC but didn't have to do many of the operational tasks associated with running a magazine—instead, I could focus on strategic planning.

Creating Committees for Unpopular Decisions

A manager can delegate tasks to others but not decision making. However, he or she can always set up committees to study complicated issues and make recommendations. This is a particularly useful strategy when making a controversial decision or policy that will upset people no matter which option you choose.

The trick is ensuring that the committee's recommendations meet your objectives. It helps to organize the committee in such a way that most of its members share your viewpoints or are loyal to you. You may now ostensibly

make your decision by following the recommendations from the committee. This usually minimizes the level of dissatisfaction stemming from the decision.

Illustrating Example:

An Academic Environment

M was a very skillful academic administrator who moved with ease from faculty member to department head to dean and finally chancellor. University faculty can be an unruly bunch—they don't always respect authority—so successfully holding an academic administrative position requires being popular among the faculty. Of course, making controversial decisions comes with the risk of lowering an administrator's popularity. M had a way of using committees to mitigate this risk.

When tackling a controversial issue, M would talk to people to get ideas. He would then make up his mind about what he intended to do, but instead of informing people of his decision, he would form a committee. Since he had already chatted with people about the issues, he could appoint a sufficient number of committee members who he already knew shared his viewpoints. The committee recommendation would then more than likely match what he already had in mind. However, seemingly making his decision based on the recommendation lessened the negative response. He was very successful in using this strategy.

Illustrating Example:

A Government Environment

Typically, the assistant secretary for management (ASM) at a federal cabinet agency is responsible for agency-wide administrative services and policies. One such function is resource allocation, which is always controversial. One ASM tried to minimize the controversy by forming a committee to make decisions. He had three people from his office populate it,

along with three representatives from other offices in the agency. By controlling the agenda, his staff had the advantage of influencing the other members, so the committee usually made recommendations that matched the ASM's interests.

However, politics being politics, sometimes the ASM's staff manipulated the agenda to generate their own preferred results and not necessarily those of the ASM. They could easily blame the other committee members for the outcome.

A study has found that “by increasing an employee's level of engagement,” his or her performance can be expected to improve by 20 percent.¹ I contend that the effects of smart motivation and delegation go far beyond simply increasing the staff's level of engagement. Smart motivation and delegation can foster dedication and reveal untapped talent, so you can expect performance to improve far beyond 20 percent. I thus don't view efforts to improve employee engagement as cost effective, especially when motivation and delegation result in engagement anyway. ■

Reference

1. “Corporate Leadership Council Identifies New Roadmap to Engagement,” Corporate Executive Board, Apr. 2007, <http://ir.executiveboard.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=113226&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=983769&highlight=>.

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