
As a Manager, What Should You Delegate?

by Anna Johnson

As a manager, you're expected to decide what needs to be done, gather the resources to do it, and then decide who does what. This also include setting goals, gathering resources, and delegating tasks.

Now, if you're like many managers, there sometimes isn't any clear line between the work you think you should do, and the work you think your staff should do. For instance, you might roll up your sleeves and get your hands and legs dirty. That is, you might do a range of tasks that mirror those that your staff do.

Of course, you want to make the most of your time - and the time of the people who work for you - in order to generate the best possible results from your team as a whole. So how do you decide who does what? How do you decide what you should do, and what your staff should do?

I know - it seems logical that if you - or someone else - is better at a certain task than anyone else, then you or that other person should do it. But many times this does not generate the most overall value!

There is an economic principle called "comparative advantage" that, when applied to management, essentially says that when allocating tasks among people, each person should not do what they are best at, but what they are "most best" at. In other words, each person should do the things that generate the most value for the group as a whole.

So, let's say you run a consultancy. We'll keep it simple and imagine you can do two things very well - you're an excellent manager, and you're an outstanding consultant. In fact, you're better at managing and consulting than each of the consultants you employ. Now, given that you're the best consultant you have, you may be tempted to forego some of your management duties to spend more time consulting.

But before you do so, ask yourself: what is likely to generate the best overall results (as in revenues, profits or however else you measure results)? Is it focusing wholly on managing, or doing less managing and more consulting?

The answer is, of course, that it depends on what you are "most best" at. If you're better at managing than consulting - in the sense that for every hour you spend managing your team you indirectly generate greater results than what you generate for an hour you spend consulting - then you should spend all your time managing. Regardless of how much you enjoy consulting, and regardless of the fact that you're better at consulting than everyone else in your firm.

The principle of comparative advantage equally applies to allocating and delegating tasks to everyone in your team and outside your team too - for example, outsourcing. In fact, it applies to allocating every kind of resource you have.

So I encourage you to use this approach - you might be amazed at how much more time it gives you and how much better the productivity and performance of you and your staff.