

Leadership and management: delegating for success

KEY WORDS

- » Accountability
- » Culture
- » Delegate
- » Responsibility
- » Roles
- » Tasks

With an eye to contemporary topics of interest to today's nurse managers, this series explores the issues and challenges associated with becoming a leader. In this article we explore how leaders and managers need to learn how to delegate, letting go of some tasks and successfully passing them on to other members of the team.

Successful leaders or managers are ones who head up a team where all of the skills available to them are utilised to their full extent. One of the first skills any team leader must learn is that of letting go of some tasks and passing these to other members of the team. Delegation is not about shifting responsibility; it is about identifying tasks that the leader does not need to do and identifying someone who can do them and who will (quite often) benefit from engaging in the challenge that undertaking new tasks brings.

This paper will explore some of the salient elements of delegation and how to be successful in applying them in the leadership role.

WHY DO WE DELEGATE?

Delegating tasks enables leaders to ensure that their job gets done and creates time to undertake tasks that may require more high level skill sets. The primary function of any team is that they get the collective work done (Ward, 2003). Failure to delegate tasks means that managers deny their team the opportunity to grow and develop (Templar, 2005). As such, one of the key benefits of delegation is the opportunity it affords the manager to demonstrate trust in members of the team.

Undertaking delegated tasks presents staff members with the opportunity to expand their skill sets and develop confidence in new areas. Other benefits include increased efficiency and efficacy and the potential for increasing the team's morale. In the longer term, team members may feel their abilities and potential are being recognised and used. People who are working to their potential are easier to retain and as they are happy might encourage others to come on board.

The benefits of delegation include:

- » Rise in efficiency
- » Job satisfaction
- » Effective use of skills
- » More management time
- » Personal and professional development
- » Generates a developmental culture.

Barr and Dowding (2008) point out badly applied delegation can be destructive; bad delegation might include a lack of clarity about the role, poor understanding of the skills of the delegate and a failure to divest authority and resources to undertake the task being delegated. Managers need to be aware of these issues before they consider delegating any role to any member of their team.

HOW TO DELEGATE

The first question any manager has to ask before delegating any task is 'what do I want to achieve from the delegation?' The purpose of delegation has to be clear to both the delegator and the delegate before a task is delegated (Mullins, 2007). Clarity is important regardless of the task being delegated, including one-off events, such as an audit or ongoing tasks like writing of the duty roster.

As well as deciding what to delegate, the manager has to be certain that the person he/she is delegating to has the ability to undertake the task being delegated. One way to link tasks and roles to individuals' skills is using the appraisal process (Barr and Dowding, 2008). Appraisals may be used to identify not only individual skills but also people's aspirations which may then be linked to roles and responsibilities that can be delegated to them.

If potential delegates do not have the required skills to undertake the delegated task, the manager

might find ways to support them to acquire these skills — this might include a course of study, specific training, learning from a colleague or the manager him/herself.

Often managers spent time solving problems for staff that the staff ought to solve for themselves; according to Maddux (1998) this prevents staff from developing problem-solving skills of their own and developing into positions of leadership. The other obstacle to delegation is the culture of the team or organisation: people need to feel safe when a task is delegated; they need to feel they will not be blamed if the task goes wrong for reasons over which they have no or little control.

WHY SOME MANAGERS DON'T DELEGATE

Learning to delegate, and indeed the process of delegation, is a front-loaded process — that is the first time a task or role is delegated may require some considerable input from the manager, perhaps more than actually just doing the task him/herself (Hansten and Jackson, 2009). Delegation is an investment, the rewards of which may not be reaped for some time, and too many managers take the short-term view (Ellis and Bach, 2015).

Managers are human too, which means they need to feel needed and, therefore, sometimes they fear that the act of delegating may demonstrate they are not needed. This fear of handing over tasks prevents many managers from developing both their staff and themselves. Other managers fear that if they develop their staff too much, their staff will leave for better paid jobs with increased responsibility; of course this is a possibility, but good teams have good reputations and tend to attract and retain staff.

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS WITH DELEGATION

Done badly, delegation can create more problems for the manager than it actually solves. When delegating, managers need not only to follow the process as identified in *Box 1*, they also need to be delegating for all the right reasons; falling short on either of these steps has the potential that the delegation will go badly and that the team will end up in a worse place than they started in.

Staff can be resistant to delegation for many reasons. Some staff just do not want the

responsibility, and will refuse to do anything beyond what they agreed to do in their role description. Or some staff do not want to undertake a task because it is boring, might be beneath them or they are too busy with what they already do.

It is true enough that some tasks are mundane or have little kudos associated with them. More experienced managers will realise that there are three ways to approach this type of resistance: the first is to be directive and persuade the person to accept the task, the second is to offer the incentive of allowing them to do something else that they want to do as well (for example, a course or another role), and the third is to pair the more resistant staff off with someone who is more positive and who will drive a project forward.

Some potential delegates will claim they do not have the skills required to undertake a given task; this can be easily overcome by identifying the skills deficit and putting in place the training and development needed; so that the excuse becomes void.

CONCLUSION

This paper outlined that delegation is a key function of any leader or manager. We have seen that delegation brings benefits to the individual, the team, the organisation and the delegating manager.

We have identified that some of the benefits for the team and organisation might include better motivation and morale of staff, improved retention and recruitment, and the development of positive workplace cultures.

We have identified that some managers avoid delegating because they are scared that they will demonstrate that they are not needed or that members of their team are better at some tasks than they are themselves. Of course these are very real fears, but leaders or managers need to learn to put their own fears to one side and consider what is in the best interests of the delegate, the team, the organisation and, most importantly, the patient.

Box 1. Steps to successful delegation.

- Identify the role or task to be delegated
- Identify the delegate(s)
- Ensure delegate(s) have the required skills
- Ensure the reasons for the delegation are understood
- Ensure the required outcome and time frame are agreed
- Ensure resources and authority are in place
- Support the delegate(s)
- Give feedback to the delegate(s)

Failure to address the requirements for successful delegation may lead to a failure of delegation. Therefore, managers should never undertake the process of delegating lightly

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