

The Art of Delegation



Project managers have numerous pressures on their time, and need to achieve a high rate of productivity. Effective delegation is the key to success.

Delegation is when you assign responsibility to another person to carry out a specific task, and is one of the most important management skills. You delegate, or assign responsibility for an action every time you:

- Assign a resource to a schedule activity;
- Assign responsibility for an action item, issue or risk; or
- Decide to transfer a job on your to-do list to someone else as part of your personal time management strategy¹.

To delegate effectively, you do need to put yourself in a position where there are good people to whom you can delegate responsibility and be mentally prepared to accept the fact that you need to delegate to others - if you can delegate properly it is **not** quicker to do the thing yourself!

Delegation Decision List

When to delegate:

- When somebody else can do the job better
- When you don't have the time to do it properly
- When a junior can do it adequately (appropriate cost / time / quality trade off)
- When it is a low priority on your list and doing it will affect other more important work
- When the work will provide training or skills development – requires adequate support!
- When it is necessary as a part of your personal time management

When not to delegate:

- When no one can do the job better than you
- When it is confidential
- When it is beyond the capabilities of anyone available to be delegated to
- When the effort of delegation is more than the time needed for the work (vary rare)
- When it is important for you to keep direct personal control (very rare and easily managed)

PM Process Delegations

Many people forget that assigning work to a person through any of the project management processes is in effect a delegation. You need to assign the appropriate level of authority and responsibility to an individual who accepts the responsibility for accomplishing the task. The person needs an:

- **Activity name.** This usually comes from the schedule but may need to be more specific.
- **Explanation.** Describe the work, the deliverable, any quality or performance criteria, and how the deliverable will be tested, transitioned or accepted – see SMARTER below.
- **Start-date and end-date.** Be clear on when the activity can start and when the activity is due. If the team member cannot meet the deadline date, the project manager needs to know as soon as possible.

¹ For more on **personal time management** see:
https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1054_Personal_Time_Management.pdf

- **Estimate of the hours of effort and/or costs.** The parameters estimated for the work should be communicated. If these cannot be achieved the project manager know as soon as possible.
- **Constraints or dependencies.** Make sure the person understands any relationship with other activities or the wider environment, including things that may affect the start or progress of the work and other activities that may be dependent on output from the activity.
- **Other resources.** If there are other resources assigned to the activity, all of the people involved need to understand who is leading the work and their individual commitments or involvement.

Personal Delegations

Based on the available skills in the people you can delegate to; all of the tasks in your to-do list that have a low level of importance should be delegated and potentially some of the important ones as well. You need to focus on tasks that are in your area of expertise - where you can make the biggest difference for the entire team/project and allocate the rest of the items on your list amongst the team, based on their individual skill sets. Let the team know the process you've been through, the fact that you need their help, and the relevance and value of the tasks you are delegating.

Making a Delegation

To start the process first select the people to delegate to, based on their positive attitude and demonstrated willingness to challenge and contribute – people who already deliver what's expected of them in terms of timeliness and quality and go beyond what's expected. Having chosen the people, start small, build on what they already know and existing skills but also be prepared to use the delegation to help the person grow in confidences and capability by adding incremental 'extras' – make sure the additional challenges are seen as an opportunity, not a punishment.

Each delegation requires the person to:

- Know how to do the task (preferably they already have the skills or have access to coaching and mentoring² support).
- Why the task needs doing³ – its relevance and their contribution to the greater objective.
- Exactly what has to be accomplished using the acronym SMARTER. Each delegation should follow these SMARTER rules:
 - Specific
 - Measurable
 - Agreed
 - Realistic
 - Timebound
 - Ethical
 - Recorded

² For more on **coaching and mentoring** see: <https://mosaicprojects.com.au/Training-PM-Coach.php>

³ Explaining what has to be achieved and why is at the core of effective delegation. For more on **effective explanation** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1090_Effective_Explanations.pdf



Manage the delegation:

- Meet regularly, face to face or if your team is split across many use collaboration tools, video conferencing or plain old phone calls.
- Monitor progress, use status or progress reports, timesheets or other ways to get the data you need to establish how well the work is progressing.
- Make time to socialise with your team members. The more 'together' your team feels, the easier it will be for them to work with each other and with you. The increased levels of trust make it easier to manage the work and them as individuals.

Good delegation saves you time, develops your people, grooms a successor, and motivates. Whereas poor delegation will de-motivate your team, confuse the other person and fail to achieve the task or purpose. To maximise the outcomes, regularly assess how each person is doing, how you are doing and where there have been 'failures' the cause of the failure, most of the time it's caused by management not the individual.

Auftragstaktik – the use of 'bounded initiatives'

The military doctrine of 'command and control' heavily influenced the structural approach to management characterised as 'Scientific Management' and the works of Taylor (1911). Scientific management assumes, amongst other things, that 'supervision must be achieved through a clear chain of command and through the application of impersonal rules' and that 'only those at the top have the capacity and opportunity to direct the enterprise'. This philosophy has strongly influenced the development of project management⁴. But does not offer the opportunity for autonomy and the motivation⁵ obtained from self-direction, and does not represent effective military management!



More than 100 years ago Carl von Clausewitz wrote, *“War is the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty. . . . The commander must work in a medium which his eyes cannot see; which his best deductive powers cannot always fathom; and with which, because of constant changes, he can rarely become familiar.”* Substitute 'project' for war and the sentiment remains true today!

Following the defeat of the Prussian armies by Napoleon at the battles of Jena and Auerstedt in 1806, the concept of ridged process-oriented command and control structures has been progressively replaced by the concept of 'auftragstaktik', or directive command. These ideas were originally championed by Major

⁴ See **The Origins of Modern Project Management:**
https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PDF_Papers/P050_Origins_of_Modern_PM.pdf

⁵ For more on **motivation** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1048_Motivation.pdf

General Gerhard von Scharnhorst and were formalised by German Generalfeldmarschall Helmuth von Moltke who was the chief of staff of the Prussian Army for thirty years from 1857.

The core concept of auftragstaktik is 'bounded initiative'. Provided people within the organisation hierarchy have proper training and the organisational culture is strong, the leader's role is to clearly outline his/her intentions and rationale. Once this is understood, subordinate personnel can formulate their own plan of action for the tasks they are allocated and design appropriate responses to achieve the objectives based on their understanding of the actual situation, exploit opportunities and mitigate problems.

The investment necessary to achieve this capability is not simply a question of financial and material resources – time is critical both for the training of individuals and the development organisations. In von Moltke's army, a junior Prussian commander exercising his initiative on the battlefield was most likely drawing upon a variety of resources at his disposal including:

1. His understanding of his commander's explicitly stated directive that would have provided him with an appreciation of the situation, a specific task, and a description of the commander's intentions.
2. His beliefs about his organisation, his role within that organisation, and the degrees of freedom available to him in the exercise of that role.
3. His expertise in the technical aspects of the military profession.
4. His understanding of his commander and his peers.

These latter aspects are captured in the notion of 'implicit intent', would provide him with the basis for his course of action and bound the solution space available to him.

A General may wish to defend a city, a Brigade Commander defend his designated sector and within the sector, a Platoon Commander may be tasked with establishing a road block which involves one of his NCOs establishing a strongpoint. The General does not need to instruct the NCO on how to site the strong point, camouflage it or man it. At each level, good leaders will think 'two levels up' and provide oversight 'one level down'. The process is not random, Standard Operating Procedures⁶ (SOP) define how specific tasks should be accomplished and 'bounded initiative' allows the individual leader to optimise the SOP for the specific circumstances he or she encounters to best support the overall intent of the commander. Von Moltke emphasised that he wanted to 'steer' initiative in the right direction.

These concepts are closely aligned with the human resources approach to management, which developed in the 1950s and 60s and emphasise a symbiotic relationship between individuals and organisations where 'democratic leadership is the most effective means of managing' and 'openness and participation are the most effective means of demonstrating democratic leadership'.

On very small projects, a project manager may be capable of directing and controlling the work of everyone in the team. However, as soon as the team or the technology grows beyond a relatively simple system direct 'command and control' becomes impossible and attempting to impose a ridged hierarchy based on formal instructions will lead to inefficiencies. Effective leaders establish clear guidelines and a system of protocols and standard operating procedures, within a chain of command, so that everyone in the project team knows what they to do and who is accountable.

The overall action of the team is unified by the leader's intent; within this space sub-teams and smaller work groups are allocated their individual missions and tasks within that higher intent. Once this framework is in place, properly trained team members have autonomy over their work and the opportunity to achieve mastery, but at the same time can see how their efforts contribute to the overall objectives. All intrinsic motivators!

⁶ For more on **Standard Operating Procedures** see:
https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1086_Standard_Operating_Procedures.pdf



Auftragstaktik is not an easy option, the team needs better leadership, better training and the willingness to engage in taking 'bounded initiatives' but overall it offers a much better way of achieving the project's objectives.

Applying these concepts does not reduce the importance of the normal project management artefacts such as the schedule and cost plan; what changes is the way these artefacts are used. In a decentralised management structure, the Project Plan defines the guidelines and framework the team will work within rather than attempting to prescribe how they will work⁷. Innovation and improvisation are encouraged within the boundaries to drive continuous improvement.

Delegation Check List

To delegate work to team members, everyone needs to be clear about the following:

- **Activity name.** A clear, unique name to facilitate effective communication.
- **An explanation.** The reason the work being delegated needs to be clearly defined together with authority levels and escalation options.
- **The deliverable.** The team member needs to understand the cope of the work and the deliverable or work component (a portion of a larger deliverable) that he/she is expected to complete. If there are quality criteria to meet, the team member should know these quality requirements and any relevant acceptance criteria.
- **Start-date and end-date.** Everyone needs to be clear on when the activity can start and when the activity is due to be completed. If the team member cannot meet the deadline date, he/she needs to let the project manager know as soon as possible.
- **Estimated effort and costs (optional).** If the team member cannot complete the work within the time and cost estimate, he/she needs to let the project manager know as soon as possible with the reason if known and any suggestions to resolve the problem⁸.
- **Dependencies and constraints.** Make sure the team member knows the relationship between his/her work and any other activities – ones that are waiting on the deliverable or ones that must be completed before his/her work can start (or continue).
- **Other resources.** Communicate if there are other people or resources working on the same activities. The team member must understand their role and who has overall responsibility for the activity.

If team members understand the work perfectly but don't deliver on time, you may have a performance problem. However, if the team member is not clear about the work they have been assigned or the due date, the project manager may have a communication problem.

Remember the RAAP box

Where the person being delegated to has to manage the work of others to achieve the required outcome it is important to remember the RAAP box when making the delegation. The RAAP box has four sides labelled:

- **R** for Responsibility
- **A** for Accountability
- **A** for Authority
- **P** for Power



⁷ For more on this see *Project Controls in the C21 – What works / What's fiction*: https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PDF_Papers/P083_Project_Controls_in_the_C21.pdf

⁸ For more on *problem solving* see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1013_Problem_Solving.pdf

RAAP boxes exist in all sizes. Small boxes for junior staff, larger for middle managers, and really big for senior leadership. The most important characteristic is not the size of the box, but that all sides are equal and support each other. A shortened or missing leg means an ineffective delegation. From the person receiving the delegation's perspective:

Responsibility is easy to get, they are made responsible for something.

Accountability is usually as easy to get as responsibility; in fact, they might arrive at the same time. "You are now in charge of this and you better not mess it up!" Although the person doing the delegation also remains accountable for the outcomes.

Authority, is harder to get, sometimes they can have positional authority, such as a team leader overseeing a team. If not, the person doing the delegation needs to ensure adequate authority is provided to the delegate by making some of their authority available to the person.

Power, is the hardest element to delegate. The person has to be willing to earn and exercise power (ie, the ability to influence the actions of others) through a combination of expertise, authority and personal characteristics such as leadership⁹.

Your delegate will not be able to successfully lead the work you are making them responsible for unless their RAAP box is of an appropriate size and balanced.



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⁹ For more on exercising power and authority see *Understanding Power and Authority*.
https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1095_Understanding_Power_Authority.pdf