

Delegation: A skill you didn't learn in graduate school

As your career grows, there comes a time when you must acquire more work than you can complete by yourself. Yet effective delegation requires time and skill. Do you know how to delegate? Effectively?

There are at least two major considerations when deciding when to delegate. First, in the interest of your firm and your client you must decide who can do the work effectively. Second, ask yourself if this is an appropriate opportunity to provide a junior colleague with a learning experience.

Who can do the work effectively? Presumably you can or you would refer the work to a colleague, rather than keep it yourself or delegate it. Is there someone who can do it equally well - or well enough to meet the needs of the client - at a lower cost to the client, leaving you available to do more profitable work or work that others can't? If so, the work is suitable for delegation with any necessary oversight.

Does this work provide an appropriate teaching opportunity? Would you and your firm benefit from having another person learn the skills this project requires? Would a colleague, presumably a junior colleague, benefit from learning how to do the work this project entails? If so, this project is suitable for delegation with appropriate supervision.

When you've concluded that a project is suitable for delegation, these steps will help you delegate well:

1. Understand that delegating to a new associate or an associate you haven't worked with before will likely require more time than doing the work yourself. Recognize that you're making an investment in the future - yours, your associate's and your firm's.
2. Match the work to the appropriate associate based on skills, interests and stage of development, rather than handing it off to the first associate who rounds the corner. (You wouldn't do that, would you?). Take the time to know the associates you work with - or plan to work with - so you can assign work that enhances their career growth while meeting the needs of your clients and your firm.
3. Provide an overview of the project and how the associate's work fits into the larger picture of your matter. This will help your associate meet the needs of the immediate project and learn how to take responsibility for larger portions of future matters.
4. When first working with an associate, provide him or her with suggestions or an outline about how to get started. As your associate becomes more experienced, give fewer initial suggestions, instead asking him or her to offer ideas and outline a plan to proceed. If you foresee a problem, rather than immediately point it out, ask "what if" questions that will help your associate recognize the potential problem.
5. Agree on a communications plan and timetable. Tell your associate when and how you want an update, first draft and/or finished project. Advise your associate to come to you at any time with questions or problems. Be very clear about your expectations and build in time for re-work.
6. Review the work with the associate. Provide feedback and instruct your associate to make necessary corrections or improvements. If you must make corrections yourself, review and explain your corrections. DO NOT make changes without explaining them to your associate. The

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experience will be disheartening and you will miss a significant opportunity to help your associate gain knowledge and confidence.

7. Provide final feedback, including both positive and constructive, about your associate's performance as well as product. Did your associate provide timely communications? Did he or she ask intelligent questions, make well-reasoned decisions? Was your associate responsive to suggestions or corrections? DO NOT overlook substantive performance or product problems. DO begin and end your feedback with positive comments and, where possible, outweigh critical feedback with positive feedback by a ratio of four or five to one.
8. Inform your associate about the outcome of the matter and his or her role in the outcome.

Effective delegation will serve you, your associates, your firm and your clients.

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