

# Managing

MARCIA PENNINGTON SHANNON

## The Art and Science of Delegation

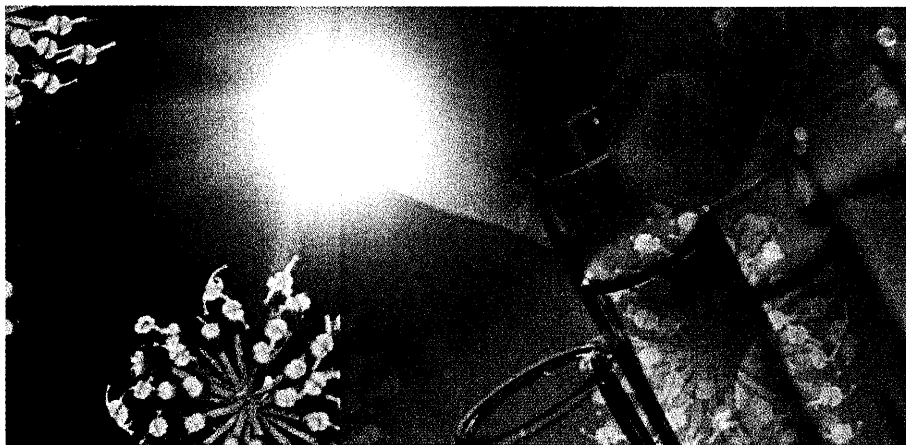
*Delegate: To commit or entrust to another; to empower. —Webster's Dictionary*

**M**y husband and I just finished a discussion about activities that we could delegate to our two teenage sons. In doing so, we looked at activities (read chores) that either son could easily do. Having these routine tasks off our plates would free us to do other, more rewarding things, like spend more time with each other. In addition, we discussed other activities that would be more challenging to Patrick and Michael but, with time, would allow them to increase their skills and knowledge and take on greater responsibilities. The outcomes would include feelings of accomplishment and contribution, greater self-esteem and the ability to be self-sufficient—important as they get closer to going off to college.

Delegation is an essential management tool, whether we're talking about managing at home or in the workplace. It is not easy, though. Like many skills, it is as much an art as a science and is learned only through experience.



Marcia Pennington Shannon ([www.shannonandmanch.com](http://www.shannonandmanch.com)) is a principal in the Washington, DC, attorney management consulting firm Shannon & Manch, LLP. She is coauthor of *Recruiting Lawyers: How to Hire the Best Talent* (ABA, 2000).



Our own psyches create the greatest obstacles to delegating. You've likely heard yourself say, "It's faster to do it myself" or "He or she won't do it properly" (meaning "my way"). Those concerns may be valid. However, the payoffs to delegating effectively are much greater than the discomfort these messages give us. Tops among the payoffs are greater employee satisfaction and freeing up your time to pursue other activities.

### Getting Started: Categorizing Your To-Do List

Begin the delegation process by making a list of your current projects and activities. Must you do all these things yourself? If you consider the question critically, the answer is probably a resounding no.

Assess the list: Which activities must you keep entirely on your own plate? Which ones can you hand to someone else? Looking at the activities

that you can delegate, categorize them into two types:

■ In the first category, place activities that are routine and repetitive in nature. These activities, although they may require some skill or training, can usually be learned quickly by someone else. Many administrative tasks fall into this category.

■ The second category is for those activities that require a specific kind of background and skill level, where you'll need to assess the experience of the person to whom you delegate. These activities will provide professional development opportunities for the delegatee.

For example, are you working on a particular matter that a more junior lawyer could definitely handle, once you've explained the details, introduced the client and incorporated some oversight into the project plan? Remember, in this second category of assignments, the delegatee does not

need your knowledge and skill level. These assignments are opportunities to pass on your expertise and knowledge to less-experienced people and help them grow professionally.

### Considering the Details

Once you have assessed your list of projects, take the next steps. Begin by writing a description of each project to be delegated, including all the various subordinate pieces. Writing it out has two purposes:

■ First, as you review what you have written, it alerts you to whether there are any pieces missing from the assignment.

■ Second, it allows you to give a written description of the project to your delegatee. (Pieces are invariably missed when one describes a project orally.)

As you read your description, think about the skills, abilities and knowledge necessary to take on and complete this project. Also, consider your vision of this project's success. What would the outcome be if everything were done as you would like?

Lastly, consider the timeline for completing the entire project. What is a realistic amount of time for finishing the various tasks involved?

### Assessing the Delegatee's Characteristics

For each project to be assigned, think about the individuals to whom you can delegate. Is there a specific person who has the characteristics necessary for this job? For example, if the assignment requires dealing with a client, are you comfortable having a particular subordinate be involved in client contacts?

Consider the individual's level of experience in relation to the project. What kind of training will she need to

accomplish this assignment? What are his strong points and weak spots? Knowing the strengths, weaknesses and working styles of your staff plays an important role in delegating. Without this knowledge, you will never feel comfortable delegating particular tasks. Also, the chance of delegating to an individual who's inappropriate for a given assignment is much greater.

### Making Communication the Key

The biggest pitfall in delegating is a lack of communication between the one assigning the project and the person doing the work. If you don't properly describe the assignment, state the expectations and give complete information, resources and advice, you are setting the assignment up for failure. The more information you give up front, the fewer questions the person will need to ask during the assignment.

Importantly, however, two-way communication needs to continue *throughout* the assignment, not just at the beginning. Depending on the complexity of tasks involved and the level of the delegatee's experience, regularly scheduled check-ins may be necessary. Be sure you talk with the delegatee about the best way to ask questions and give status reports during the project.

### Finding New Challenges

One of the major reasons we have employees is to lessen our own workloads, giving us more time for greater involvement with business development, strategic planning and other types of work that challenge and satisfy us. Delegating to others allows those individuals, in turn, to learn new skills, face new challenges and contribute more substantially to the organization. These are all key ingredients for a happy and productive workplace. **LP**

## Action Plan

- Describe the delegated assignment fully—and put it in writing. Include tasks to be accomplished, useful resources, timelines and your vision of the project's successful completion.
- Know the characteristics of your staff—their strengths, weaknesses and work styles. Consider which assignments will add to their professional development, regardless of their current role in the workplace.
- Expect mistakes. You made them as you were learning—your delegatee will make them, too. How you help your people learn from their mistakes is the important task here.
- Communicate fully to ensure the assignment is done successfully and the person has an opportunity for professional development.
- Make it clear that you're available for questions and advice throughout the project. The assignment will be completed faster, with fewer errors, and the person will have the benefit of your knowledge, which will serve him or her well in the next assignment.
- Don't micromanage. That's not delegating. That's just doubling your work—and it does not enable the delegatee to learn to take on greater responsibility.

### RESOURCES

- *How to Delegate* by Robert Heller and Tim Hindle. DK Essential Managers Series, 1997.
- *If You Want It Done Right, You Don't Have to Do It Yourself!: The Power of Effective Delegation* by Donna M. Genett. Quill Driver, 2003.
- *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen R. Covey. Simon & Schuster, 1990.