

LETTING GO TO GET AHEAD



The delegation of power is a dance that balances three parts: authority, accountability, and responsibility.

Sarah was in a quandary. Overloaded, she knew she was hesitating to delegate her workload to her staff. But she was just too new in the job to be confident that they would get it done to the standards that had gotten her promoted.

One of the most significant hurdles in the transition from "in the trenches" to "bigger picture" is learning to delegate. Leadership requires knowing when to exercise or delegate authority, and how to assign accountability. But while responsibility can be shared, a leader can never get out from under it. As Harry Truman so famously said, "The buck stops here." Or, as Jim Collins observed in *Good To Great*: "Level 5 leaders (those who create stand-out organizations) look out the window to apportion credit to factors outside themselves when things go well. At the same time, they look in the mirror to apportion responsibility...when things go poorly."

One way to look at power -- and the delegation of power -- is as a dance that balances three parts: authority, accountability, and responsibility. Often, they are treated as the same; but their differences shape leaders.

- Authority is the right to decide, to command, to make things happen. Without authority a leader becomes a eunuch for he does not have the capacity to procreate, in other words produce the required results.
- Accountability means answering for one's actions; taking appropriate blame (or credit). One who is accountable is, indeed, required to "stand and account" for outcomes under all circumstances.
- Responsibility encompasses fulfilling obligations, including, when necessary, making things right. The word literally means "able to respond" -- not failing to act if capable of action.

Consider, for example, the classic story of young George Washington chopping down the cherry tree. The act was a problem because the boy did not have the authority to do it. When his father confronted him, George did not try

to shift the blame or make excuses, but said, "Yes, I did it. I cut down the cherry tree with my little hatchet." He was admirably accountable. But the lad needed to go one step farther to be responsible: making things right by planting another tree.

We all know the issue is important, and we may be motivated to look for all sorts of delegating techniques. Every leader knows that uneasy feeling of delegating outcomes to a subordinate, that question of, "will she really be able to deliver the goods?" That fear leads to all sorts of organizational hobgoblins; micromanaging, "doing the subordinate's job for them," confusion over roles and accountabilities, pointing the finger of blame, covering one's a** with emails or memos, insecurity, paralyzing fear, pushing decisions upstairs, etc. The list is pretty long and the impact on productivity, action, and tone can be so debilitating.

Mastering this art must begin and end with a word usually avoided in business: Faith.

Normal practice is to avoid that word in favor of less religiously loaded terms, such as "confidence" or "trust." But, in truth, sooner or later, all leaders find themselves acting on faith.

By faith we mean having absolute certainty or conviction about something for which there is no proof. In business we call this "going on gut instinct." Ironically, the bigger the idea or decision, the more faith plays a role. Life, unlike a book, simply doesn't allow us to flip to the last page and know how the story will turn out. We have to let things unfold. We must step into the unknown, pointing our organization towards outcomes that we may have only imagined we can achieve.

Part of faith is knowing that we have our whole lives to draw upon. This is not our first breath, not the first beat of our heart. Willy or nilly, we have piled up experiences. However dysfunctional we may sometimes feel, we have learned lessons. We do not walk into the unknown alone; we have with us all of our experiences, all of our life's lessons to remind us that we can prevail, that we are not without resources. As leaders we must have faith that our people have more than enough knowledge, experience, and wisdom to get the job done; and if they don't, the confidence that they will be able to figure it out.

But faith is more than that. Faith allows us the experience of standing atop a cliff and then leaping into the void -- knowing that there are invisible wings under each arm. At worst, we will fall gently to earth and pick ourselves up again. At best, we will soar.

Faith is there when we have exhausted ourselves. When we have pulled every lever that we can think of and are shocked to stillness, what lies waiting for us is faith. It encourages us to put one foot forward and then the next and the next; we keep on a-goin'. That is faith, not a sweeping concept, just keeping on with a sense that, somehow, everything will turn out OK

Sometimes, a manager may despair and say he has lost faith. But we can never really lose faith; we just lose track of it. Faith stands right behind us so that we eclipse it when we look in a mirror and see only our own reflection. But if we're very quiet, breathe very deeply, look from the corner of our eye, we see a shadow. That's faith: the certainty that the sun is still behind the moon during an eclipse.

Making vital decisions, changing habits or old behaviors, are capacities all humans possess. The ability to tap into one's wisdom and common sense is inborn. By considering the significant questions with a calm mind, we are open to receiving insights that alter perceptions and stimulate new behaviors. The only thing leaders need to "do" is to strengthen their faith, giving this ability the respect and attention that it deserves.

It takes a leap of faith to believe that others not only have the capacity to step up, but also have the commitment to make whatever contribution is required. The full authority to act must accompany delegation of responsibility. This is where skillful managers distinguish themselves. Like good parents, they place the outcome squarely on their lieutenant's shoulders while communicating the feeling of utter confidence in her success. The leader must trust that things will work out. Through experience, we gain confidence that people will rise to the occasion when given the chance.

But whenever a manager is only paying lip service to delegation, people are quick to see that the deeds don't match the words. They stop trying and wait for the leader to call the shots. They forego their God-given ability to access their common sense and withdraw to the known, to what has worked before. Effective delegation releases more constructive energy than anything else a manager can do. The effort of any one person, no matter how talented, is dwarfed by the contributions of many. This is so obvious that it needs no proof. But it does require a willingness to acknowledge that possibilities exist beyond our own knowledge or experience. When leaders have such confidence, such faith, they unleash the creativity and contributions of others, who step forward in the moment with what is needed.

Nothing worth doing can be completed in our lifetime,
Therefore, we must be saved by hope.
Nothing true or beautiful makes complete sense,
Therefore, we must be saved by faith.

-- Reinhold Niebuhr, American religious and social thinker

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