



Dear Friend,

Bottleneck

One morning I opened my inbox to find an email from a client with a coaching appointment later in the day.

"June, I know we've got a couple of matters set for today's coaching call, but can we add Frieda to the list? The situation is getting out of control." [*Name changed]*

If there's one thing I've learned over the years, it's this: When a client brings a topic to the coaching table, you dump the planned agenda and make time!

This executive had a sticky situation. Frieda was hard-working, dedicated, and knowledgeable. She also had a weird knack for ending up with far more on her plate than she should have had. Reports that others wrote poorly routinely made their way to her for reworking. Projects that rightly belonged with one of her staff members mysteriously landed on her desk for fact-checking or hole-plugging. Conveners of company teams that needed representation from her unit more often than not tapped Frieda as the go-to person, and that's where the responsibility started and stopped. And so, hard-working, dedicated, knowledgeable Frieda slowly had become tired, over-worked, and increasingly unproductive Frieda.

What do you do?

Well, in this instance I was at an advantage. I was able to work both with the executive (Frieda's supervisor) and with Frieda. While there were a number of underlying issues contributing to this present state of affairs, there was one that clearly rose to the top. Frieda had a challenge delegating. And because she struggled in that area, she, though hard-working and desiring to be helpful, had actually become an impediment to getting the work done. Frieda was a bottleneck.

And, my friends, Frieda's not alone.

So, join me for this edition of **EA Insights** as we look at delegating effectively. After all, if you're not careful, like Frieda, you too can take on so much that you become a bottleneck, rather than an expediter, of the work to be done.

All the best,

June

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The Delicate Dance of Delegating

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If you're like most of us, there's far too much work to be done for you to do it all on your own. (*Can I get a witness?*) Unfortunately, though, because many of us are wearing too many hats, it's not uncommon to unwittingly end up as bottlenecks, rather than expediters, of the work that's to be done. Let me say that a little more plainly:



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"Quotes"

"I'm going from doing all of the work to having to delegate the work -- which is almost harder for me than doing the work myself. I'm a lousy delegator, but I'm learning."
~Alton Brown

"Where 2 years ago I was working on every detail, today I make sure we're setting good goals for the company and that I set a very clear definition of that for every executive. The key is to delegate, so the management does a better job than me, and hope that my spirit to be a success is communicated through the entire management level."
~James Chu

"Strive for continuous improvement, instead of perfection."
~Kim Collins

"You can delegate authority, but you cannot delegate responsibility."
~Byron Dorgan

"With so many external pressures, heads and principals will need to delegate more authority and leadership teams will grow in importance."
~John Dunford

"The thing you learn over the years is to delegate a lot more. Not that you're not involved, but you delegate. If you have

Because we're trying to do more than we *should* be doing, we're actually doing less than we *could* be doing.

We haven't mastered the delicate dance of delegating.

Okay, that makes sense in theory. How do you reverse the situation ... really?

Two assumptions undergird the recommendations that follow. Without this foundation, it's nearly impossible to delegate effectively.

- **Assumption #1: You have the right number of people to do the job.** It may seem like a no-brainer, but I can't tell you the number of times I get called in to assist a company that clearly is understaffed. There's an insufficient number of people on the roll to do the work that's on the plate. When your numbers don't match the size of the task, the folks you do have are likely to be overworked already, and that makes delegating additional functions unwise...if not just plain cruel.
- **Assumption #2: You have the right kind of people to do the job.** Delegation can only work when the pool of prospective assignees has the knowledge, skills, and/or potential to take on the tasks being passed along. Understand that there's more to hiring than simply filling seats on the proverbial bus; to get a viable pool of people to whom you can delegate, the hiring focus must be on filling specific needs and getting the *right* people on that bus.

If these two foundational pieces are in place, however, delegating becomes not only possible, but beneficial for all involved. So, let's consider delegating basics.

When do you delegate?

I find two situations that are ripe for delegating. First, you delegate when there's a ton of work to do; sharing the load with others makes sense when there's a need for extra hands. Second, delegating is effective as a learning opportunity; when a specific task would help you learn how to supervise another person or when it would expand the knowledge, skill, or network of the assignee, then pass off.

What do you delegate?

My recommendation is that you delegate what others can do, and keep the jobs that only you can do or should do. In other words, there usually are some items on your to-do list that you really can't assign, like a supervisor's need to complete an annual performance evaluation or a notary public who must notarizing documents; those functions are yours and yours alone. There also are items on that list that you shouldn't assign (at all or at least for now), perhaps due to the expertise involved or the current, heavy workload of those around you; these you keep too. However, everything else is open for *possible* delegation.

To whom do you delegate?

To answer this question, go back to our foundational assumptions. Making assignments hinges upon having enough people and the right people with whom you can share the load. If you're understaffed or improperly staffed, your pickings will be slim when you're checking the roster to parcel out the work.

But, assuming that you have enough of the right folks in place, you should only delegate an assignment to someone with the capability to perform it. You only pass a task to a person with the demonstrated skill (or, in your opinion, the potential) to execute the work you're transferring. After all, you wouldn't give a baby a Harley to drive or expect a nuclear physicist to prosecute a case in court. You see, in connecting person to assignment, the goal is to do your best to match knowledge, skills, potential, and motivation to the task at hand.

Why are the results of delegating so unpredictable?

This really is the pivotal question. Delegating, in and of itself, is relatively easy; yet so many of us have gotten burned in the process. So, what is it that we seem to be missing?

- **We pigeon-hole people.** We've seen that taking note of capability and motivation are critical in making the assignment. But, we sometimes fail to recognize that capability and motivation are not static. A person's mis-fit for one task doesn't disqualify him for every task, just as a person's stellar fit for one task doesn't guarantee a slam dunk on the next. The best delegation decisions occur on a task-by-task basis, but this is an oft-overlooked point.
- **We misunderstand the nature of delegating.** Delegating isn't just passing off your work so that you can sit back and chill, nor is it just standing back and giving orders while everyone else has their hands to the plow. It's important to delegate with a purpose, as we saw before -- to get more done than you could alone (*note that you are working too!*) and/or to serve as a learning opportunity.
- **We hold back.** It's not uncommon in unsuccessful delegating scenarios to see that an assignment was made without the assignor also passing along authority to carry out the work. That's a mess waiting to happen. You've set the person up for frustration and failure because you've essentially given the person a task and then tied his hands. If you assign a task, be sure also to give the assignee the right (within reason) to take the steps necessary to follow through an accomplish what you're expecting to be done.

confidence in people around you, then you feel free to delegate."
~Pat Gillick

"Great ability develops and reveals itself increasingly with every new assignment."
~Baltasar Gracian

"Assign jobs and make sure they're done and evaluate the performance."
~Keith Jones

"I frequently will pass off part of my decision to some trusted adviser or rely on an expert recommendation."
~Barbara Kahn

"[B]ecause our organization has grown so much and in so many different ways, the delegation process places responsibility and authority on the shoulders of people you can watch grow and watch the way they treat others."
~Vince McMahon

"Come in, come to work, whatever the assignment is -- try and make it work."
~Nate McMillan

"The surest way for an executive to kill himself is to refuse to learn how, and when, and to whom to delegate work."
~James Cash Penney

"Surround yourself with the best people you can find, delegate authority, and don't interfere as long as the policy you've decided upon is being carried out."
~Ronald Reagan

"Don't be a bottleneck. If a matter is not a decision for the President or you, delegate it. Force responsibility down and out. Find problem areas, add structure and delegate. The pressure is to do the reverse. Resist it."
~Donald Rumsfeld

"[He] has the ability and the management confidence to delegate responsibility to the best people in his organization, and develop and

- **We fail to define success, or we demand perfection.** Often delegation experiences fall into the "unsuccessful" category because, as assigners, we've not devoted time on the front end to defining success on the back end. We haven't thought out -- for ourselves or for the assignee -- how the finished picture should look. Other times we paint an unrealistic picture of success, especially for one who is still learning. In these settings, successful task completion becomes either a moving target or impossible to accomplish satisfactorily. We fail to realize that it's important to get a personal handle on what acceptable or excellent (*but, please, not perfect*) work is in each situation in order to guide the assignee realistically toward that goal, give credit when you see that level of effort, and engage the person in thinking about ongoing growth in this or the next assignment.
- **We micromanage.** Just about all of us have had the experience. You get an assignment. But then the assigner stands over your shoulder and watches, and comments, and second-guesses, and reworks...every step of the way. I mean, this is far beyond *teaching*; it's *micromanaging*! Granted, there are times when a specific protocol must be followed. Barring those few exceptions, though, there usually are many ways to get a job done. Yet, sometimes the delegating situation fails, and causes boatloads of frustration on both sides, because the assigner just won't step away from the assignment. No, this does not translate into an abdication of your ultimate responsibility for the task or for teaching. It does mean coming to grips with the fact that passing off a task requires just that -- passing it off! Understand that the assignment may be done a bit differently than you would have done it (which is why that image of success becomes so important to relay to the assignee). Sometimes the outcome will be worse, sometimes better, and sometimes just different than what you would have produced. So, whether praise, instruction, or a combination of the two, what results is an opportunity -- for you and the assignee.
- **We get nervous.** *"If this person shines, will they still need me?" "If this person does poorly, will my job or my reputation be in jeopardy?"* Delegating can be scary. However, by holding on to work that others could do and by not effectively utilizing the valuable human capital around you, you actually undermine yourself far more than you would by involving others. You call into question your ability to manage human resources; you become tired, which has all sorts of personal and professional ramifications; work quality and/or timeliness suffers; and you're often not free to take on new, interesting, and career-broadening experiences for yourself. Consider, however, that when you're delegating well, you're not passing off your essential work. Instead, if you're assigning new opportunities and other necessary functions, you're demonstrating successful project and people management ability, and you're also preparing yourself for your next role (or at least for a true vacation) by investing daily in those around you.

Delegating well is a delicate dance. It's stepping forward, sometimes stepping backward, but finding a rhythm and flow and balance that works well for you and for those with whom you work.

How are you faring on the delegation dancefloor these days? If you're dealing with two left feet, have some problems staying on beat, or dance well but would welcome a partner to keep your skills at peak, reach out to us at [Executive Advantage](#) today. We're here to help you dance well. [Contact us today.](#)

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At [Executive Advantage](#), we are committed to providing results-based business and management consulting, leadership development, and coaching support. We partner with business leaders to build healthy, well-functioning organizations, where goals are met and people thrive. We also partner with individuals to create professional (and personal) lives with clearer direction, improved results, and greater balance.

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promote them."
~Lee Scott

"Everyone realizes that perfection is not possible; we're all fallible."
~Jim Sinegal

"Don't hire a master to paint you a masterpiece and then assign a roomful of schoolboy artists to look over his shoulder and make suggestions."
~Robert Townsend

"The first rule of management is delegation. Don't try and do everything yourself because you can't."
~Anthea Turner

"It is very important that each person knows what they are supposed to be doing, their personal tasks[.]"
~Tim Walker