

## A LEADERSHIP APPROACH TO DELEGATING AND MOTIVATING

By Peter Young, January 2023  
peter@bladonleadership.com

The skill of delegating work while empowering and developing others requires the following steps and skills from the leader. On the face of it each one of these seems obvious enough, and yet each one presents a demand on the leader for preparation, both in terms of the 'how to' skill, and in terms of the leader's emotional stance towards the person or team.

The steps and skills required are as follows, although they may not always proceed in exactly this order:

1. **The ability to describe the outcome or deliverable of the task or project in a 'concrete' way.** (I.e. *what exactly by when exactly.*)
  - a. **What can make it difficult:** Most professionals and technical experts instinctively describe what to *do*, not what *results* are required, so effort is required here. In fact the human brain automatically and for very good survival reasons thinks in terms of *actions* much more than *outputs* so it requires real intentionality from the leader to articulate deliverables. It is *not* automatic.
  - b. **In addition:** There are usually important constraints (typically around time, cost, and quality) that need to be communicated early on. When these are overlooked, the chance is greater that the results will disappoint in some way. Very often "poor work" is the result of a failure to inform or educate, either around outputs and deadlines, or around constraints.
2. **Some explanation of the 'why'.** This is what gives a task or project its meaning, including 'why this piece of work, why you, why now'.
  - a. **What can make it difficult:** Most of us instinctively assume the meaning of activities is understood. And yet as habits form, and routine patterns of behaviour dig ever deeper mental grooves, we tend to forget *why* we took up a certain career, why we decided to conduct a particular meeting, why we married a certain person, and so on! Remembering and reminding, both ourselves and others, should be seen as core leadership competences. (For more on this idea, see Simon Sinek's famous TED talk which picks up the theme 'people don't buy what you do, they buy why you do it'.)
3. **A careful testing of the person's commitment.** E.g. 'are you up for this?' or 'can I count on your support with this?'.
  - a. **What can make this difficult:** Most of us tend to assume commitment, or we feel reluctant to ask a question that could give us an unwelcome 'no' or a 'maybe'. Thus we unconsciously avoid hearing the uncomfortable message, when in fact it's vital information that would allow us to address potential obstacles, whether these are to do with the person's capacity, skill, confidence, or motivation. Simply helping people articulate a wholehearted 'yes' raises their levels of energy, engagement and motivation.

- b. **In addition:** People may not know exactly what they are saying yes or no to, or what is going to be involved, which can be a natural source of hesitation. So it is sometimes helpful to explore their 'in principle' willingness to get involved, and to get them to commit to first steps that can be more easily understood.
- 4. **An invitation to contribute ideas on the *how*** for example 'What do you propose?'
  - a. **What can make it difficult:** It's been said that if you're not delegating the *thinking* you're probably not really delegating at all. And this can be challenging, because as we know we tend to like our own ideas the best! So getting the other person to do the heavy lifting, and perhaps to struggle through a few iterations of thinking about the issue, can be uncomfortable to witness. We want to bail them out, and ensure they have the 'right ideas'. (You would be amazed at the number of ways I've heard people justify their stepping in to 'help') For more on this watch the wonderful video of the butterfly story at <https://youtu.be/erQul7v4OIs>
  - b. **In addition:** By asking them to engage with thinking it through, and to persist with the necessary struggle of this, we are generating opportunities, both for their own creativity and for their learning and growth. And by listening to their ideas: a) we get to see where they are strong and where they may need guidance, b) we provide recognition and encouragement, and c) we may discover something new ourselves, benefiting from their thinking.
- 5. **An invitation to think through where they'll need support.**
  - a. **What can make this difficult:** Many of us don't naturally ask for support and so we struggle on and may then let others and/or ourselves down. We may fear that asking questions or needing support makes us look weak and inadequate. So this needs careful handling by the senior party. Questions such as 'what aspects of this feel most challenging at this stage?' or indeed 'Where are you feeling most confident with this?' can serve to gently draw out the areas where help may be required. Making it OK to ask for support is a great gift from the leader.
  - b. **In addition:** Note that 'my door is always open if you need to talk' is generally not as positive an encouragement to get help as the more direct and specific approaches above. It's a warm statement, but it lacks specificity and the individual may feel more alone than they need to.
- 6. **A concrete plan going forward** that includes early-stage check-ins and early deliverables that will provide reassurance for all parties.
  - a. **What can make this difficult:** Most of us don't want to micro-manage and we want to let people get on with their work. That's fine but if we have had the conversations in 4 and 5 above, we should have identified milestones where check-ups may avoid problems from escalating down the line. This way we ensure that any deviation from the plan is quickly identified and course-corrected.
  - b. **In addition:** This is another area where it pays to be concrete early on, avoiding the habit of many managers to hang around the office asking questions such as 'how is it going' generating a certain annoyance from their team members who can feel checked up on.

7. **Check up to praise.**

- a. **What can make this difficult:** The human tendency is to automatically see what is wrong and done badly, rather than what is right and done well. Most checking-up is problem focussed and thus generally demotivating. This is especially the case when reviewing work others have done on our behalf. The leadership demand here is to be intentional about looking for what is praiseworthy. One approach is to ask what the person is particularly pleased with and how they achieved such a result; or where they feel they've made the greatest progress, and how they achieved that. Another approach is to find out in advance what challenges they anticipate, and then to explore how they overcame these.
- b. **In addition:** A huge amount of energy and mutual learning can be generated by adopting the 'positive first' approach, especially in team settings. This then allows for an exploration of 'what still needs to be addressed?' as a second stage of the review. If the so-called 'negative feedback' is then put in the context of future objectives, it can avoid triggering justifications or blamings, instead becoming a source of fresh engagement and energy.