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Obstacles to Effective Delegation

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OBSTACLES TO EFFECTIVE DELEGATION

By Cynthia Sharp, The Sharper Lawyer

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According to an English proverb, “Old habits die hard.”

Delegation Reluctance

Many attorneys have long subscribed to the “go-it-alone pioneer” mentality and spend (or waste) countless hours performing tasks appropriate for a capable subordinate lawyer or staff member. They suffer from Delegation Reluctance Syndrome (DR) and cite the following reason for their working style:

Nobody can do it as well as I can! That the senior lawyer retains ultimate accountability for the project can be the basis for DR. The person may fear that a mistake will be made and can be heard to say: “If you want something done right, do it yourself.” Indeed, the transfer of a task does involve a degree of risk. A role of the senior lawyer, however, is to teach, motivate, and provide feedback to junior lawyers and support staff in the context of an effective and responsible delegation.

If the lack of confidence is well founded because of prior unfavorable experience with the subordinate and additional past training has not proved beneficial, it may be time to review whether it is productive to retain the employee.

Not Enough Time to Delegate

The thinking is: “It will take more time to teach someone else how to do the task than to do it myself.” If the senior attorney already possesses the requisite skill and knowledge to complete a one-time task, an investment in training does not make sense. Teaching or documenting a repetitive task, however, is a wise investment of time and effort.

Fear That Employee Will Resent Delegation

The attorney does not want to impose and may fear that subordinates will resent being asked to take on certain types of tasks. For example, my friends were astonished that one of the receptionist’s jobs was to bring me and my clients’ coffee or other beverages during meetings.

I had no hesitation in passing downstream these types of tasks that I would otherwise have to handle personally. My employees were well informed about my expectations during the interview process, understood the organization’s hierarchy, and willingly carried out assignments as they were given. An employee with an attitude problem who does not cooperate presents another set of concerns beyond the scope of this article.

Unclear About Authority to Delegate

Reviewing the organizational chart and chatting with an attorney’s own supervisor can clear up this mystery.

If you have trouble identifying appropriate tasks for delegation, e-mail me for a tool that I developed—The Responsibility Shift©.

Bad Habits

A lawyer who exhibits any of the following descriptive behaviors may want to take an inward look and consider whether a change in style could benefit the organization, coworkers, and self. While these firmly entrenched habits are not easy to change, awareness is the first step.

Procrastination. Procrastinators put off many tasks including delegation. The procrastinating attorney's subordinates are frequently saddled with last minute "emergencies" because he hoards projects that could have been assigned long ago, which often makes him guilty of a D&R, described below.

Micromanagement. The Micromanager is often found looking over his secretary's shoulder—presumably to make sure she is not misspelling any words while typing. He frequently listens to his secretary's phone conversations perhaps to make sure she is conveying the correct message to the client/adversary/vendor.

While reasonable oversight is a critical component of the delegation process, micromanagement is detrimental on many levels. Organizations that employ Micromanagers are essentially paying for two people to be involved in a task that can be accomplished (at least in large part) by one person alone. Moreover, the confidence and morale of the person being over-watched is undermined because the manager seemingly does not trust her judgment or ability to work independently. Equally troublesome, staff members are often deprived of experience necessary for professional development.

Dump and Run. Victims of Dump and Run (D&R) Drive-by Delegations report the following scenarios:

- they were not given a clue as to how the assignment fits into the big picture of the case;
- they received vague and unclear instructions and perhaps a set of cryptic notes;
- they did not understand what was expected;
- they lacked the current skill set to complete the project;
- they had no idea where to turn for guidance; and/or

- the senior attorney was unavailable as a resource for clarification, direction, or support.

Valuable time is wasted while the junior lawyer or staff member spins his wheels in frustration trying to figure out a task for which he lacks fundamental training. If there is a pressing deadline (and there usually is), the manager must either re-delegate the project as a rush job or do it himself. Of course, the ideal outcome would be for the manager to identify this as a learning opportunity, make use of available delegation strategies to train the staff member, and assign the staff to draft a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP).

Sometimes, a D&R takes place because the senior attorney herself does not have the capabilities to complete the project and moreover is unaware of the resources needed to produce a quality job. Instead of requesting help from her supervisors or working as part of a collaborative team with a staff member, she commits a D&R.

If D&R is part of your current style, many valuable resources and tools are available to assist you in forming new and productive habits.

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Business development leader and veteran attorney Cynthia Sharp, Esq., works with motivated lawyers seeking to generate additional revenue for their law firms. The business development strategies and skill sets that she shares were developed and tested over a period of 30 years in practice and are constantly refined to reflect modern marketing techniques. For additional information about business development issues, check out thesharperlady.com.