

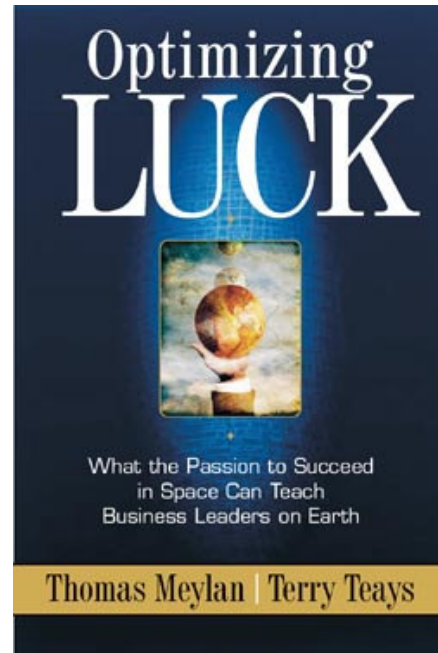
CHAPTER 6

Delegation

“Few things can help an individual more than to place responsibility on him, and to let him know you trust him.” Booker T. Washington

Delegation in a Luck Optimized System

Delegating a task to someone is not an isolated event. Delegation needs to be an integral part of all of your planning and operations. For example, following a team meeting, everyone should leave with a clear picture of who is responsible for what.



With time, your crew will become familiar with this process of delegation, and become increasingly familiar with the broader needs of the organization. As a result they will be better equipped to identify opportunities and threats on their own. They will be more prepared to respond quickly, without having to query the chain of command for advice. Their rapid responses to opportunities optimize your luck, just as their rapid responses to crises give you a more fault tolerant organization.

Our experience at IUE and later in private sector consulting demonstrated that widespread delegation produces awareness in your team about the collective abilities of your outfit. When a person becomes responsible for a piece of work they learn quickly how to identify teammates with experience or knowledge that can be brought to bear on his/her challenge. In addition, the team's confidence in meeting new challenges increases as a result of the successful completion of each delegated task. This creates and strengthens a group of collaborative partners, who see each other as proven performers.

What does this meant to you?

Earlier we pointed out how delegation needs to be conducted “in the open.” This facilitates the spread of knowledge about what the company is up to, and who is capable of making specific kinds of contributions. Increasingly, most of the work of figuring out whom to delegate tasks to at the meeting will be done by your staff themselves rather than by you. One of the reasons that this works is that a culture of delegation distributes the responsibility in such a way that the staff embraces the success of the organization as their own.

Steps for Learning to Delegate

It is delegation that removes the need for cloning yourself to get everything done that you need to. The world doesn't need twenty more of you. But it might need

one of you directing the activities of twenty or more people to get great things done.

People often complain or protest, “I don’t know how to delegate.” Well, why should you know how to delegate? It’s not a common animal behavior. It’s a cultivated human behavior. How many animals do you know who make a living in professional tennis? How many animals do you know are make a living as gourmet chefs? How many animals do you know who make a living as managers who can effectively delegate the tasks of survival to other animals in the immediate environment? (OK, maybe a few of them.)

The fact is, as children we are often “delegated to” since we’re little and have a lot to learn. Most people retain that role throughout their adult lives. But as children we don’t often have a large number of people flocking around us asking, “What should we do now?” So how do we gain experience in delegation?

This book assumes a couple of things that have to be in place before good delegation can occur. First, you have to hire the right people - “right” in terms of being able to contribute to business progress and success. Second, YOU have to observe these good people to obtain, **in your mind**, an accurate profile of their skill sets.

Keep in mind one of the chief goals of any manager: You want your actions and the actions of your team to optimize your chances of success. You don't want to think of these people as "merely filling slots." Thinking of people as slot fillers is lazy management, plain and simple. Think of even the people operating in the most menial of functions as multi-faceted resources. This not only elevates their dignity, but also helps you to draw more out of them than mere labor. If they've been at the job a long time, their experience can be an important resource to guide you to better ways of doing things.

This leaves one last act. You actually have to delegate a responsibility to someone. Here's how to get started:

1. Define and constrain the scope of the task.

In a small team the manager may be able to do this him/herself. If you are managing a larger shop, with a wide range of activities, then you may have to engage senior members of your staff to provide needed details.

2. Select a person who seems to have the skills required for the task.
3. Spell out the responsibility as clearly as you can.
4. Set your expectations of what you want done (NOT how you want it done) in concrete terms.
5. Set a time when you want things finished.
6. Cut the person loose to do it.

You remain in the background as a willing resource, if needed.

If you do this you get at least two kinds of payoff. First, you can judge how well you delegate (select a person, assign the responsibility, and support that person through the completion of task assigned). Other things to consider:

- If they succeed, both you and the person have learned more about their capabilities.
- If they achieved a qualified success, then you can judge if you actually selected the best person, or whether you weren't as clear about the assignment as you thought you were.
- If the person wasn't successful at all, then you have some tough questions to ask, starting with asking yourself about the process you used to delegate the responsibility and describe what you wanted done.

The second kind of payoff was mentioned earlier in the chapter. One of the most important dividends returned to the IUE Project from delegated authority was the very natural way that this tested the staff. Putting someone in charge of a small project allowed them to show what they could do, and their performance gave the manager concrete data on the way the delegate is able to perform. This is a key technique for identifying people who are ready to take on larger responsibilities (see Chapter 10 on recognizing and rewarding success on the job). This also gives employees a chance to test their wings and to find out if they like taking a

leadership role. As a result of this practice, managers at the IUE Project were almost always promoted from within.

Learning how to delegate is an iterative process. You have to practice delegating to get good at it. That means if things don't go particularly well the first couple of times, you have to ask those tough questions, like the following, of yourself.

- Did you understand the task well enough to know what talent you really needed?
- Were you familiar enough with the person you tapped to take on the responsibility that you could be sure you matched the right person to the job you needed done?
- Did you understand the task well enough to communicate what needed to be done accurately to your delegate?
- Did you communicate with sufficient detail what you wanted done (not HOW you wanted it done)?
- When your delegate needed assistance, were you available to mentor this individual through to success?

Successful managers are always re-assessing their approaches to things. No one ever knows enough about delegation to take their delegation skills for granted.

This iterative process is important throughout your managerial career. It's a vital habit to develop when you're just starting out and you're not used to the feeling of "having someone else do your work for you." The temptation will always be there to "take the work back," and do it yourself. You have to resist that temptation. Why? Because you are trying to learn your own new set of skills as an engineer of people-based, luck-optimizing systems. Delegation allows you to build larger systems and processes, systems and processes that are more intricate, and that handle a more comprehensive range of business conditions.

To pull this together, when your delegates return some kind of underperformance, there are always at least two places to investigate: your own approach to selecting delegates and making their assignments, and your delegates' approaches to the responsibilities you assigned them. If things seem to be working well in those two places, then you and your delegates need to look at the working context more closely to determine which environmental factors you missed while setting up your initial problem.

The key is to keep practicing your delegation skills. It's not a natural skill set. Delegation is a general problem solving skill set that improves with practice.