

Three Reasons You Shouldn't Delegate

By Whitney Johnson

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[Delegate](#) (v.) - to commit (powers, functions, etc.) to another as agent or deputy; entrust, assign, transfer.

When we hear the word "delegate" in the context of best management practices there is often an assumption that the person in charge needs to delegate more, and that those not in charge want more assigned or entrusted to them. Ndubuisi Ekekwe's post, "[The Leadership Lessons of Ants](#)," is an especially compelling piece on the benefits of delegating and fully utilizing your team. And yet aren't there times when your instinct tells you not to delegate? Based on my own experience, here are three particular situations where delegating is inadvisable:

1. Are you struggling to explain precisely what you want the delegatee to do? Whether it's a project that requires an [emergent or deliberate strategy](#), if you can't articulate what problem needs to be solved, or exactly what needs to be done, it's usually best to wait to assign responsibility for a task until you can. A potential sign that you've delegated too early is when those under your supervision make statements like, "I wasn't really sure what you wanted," or you hear it whispered that you're capricious. There are then two possibilities. You didn't hire well and members of your team really aren't capable of the task at hand. The other likelihood is that you delegated prematurely. Think through the problem or task a little longer, long enough so you can clearly explain what you want to achieve.

2. Are you putting your own development or ability to lead in jeopardy by delegating? It is irrefutable that leaders need to develop others, but as we rise to more senior positions and have more resources at our disposal, we may tend to delegate too much, or hand off tasks that are vital to our own development.

Several years ago, I came across a CEO who was technically and operationally brilliant, but lacking in people skills, a skill set vital to employee morale and retention. Because the company was well-funded, he could afford to delegate and as a consequence became increasingly insulated from his employees with the exception of a few trusted advisors.

Delegation taken to its extreme creates the bubble that typically surrounds high-ranking political leaders. A recent column in the Wall Street Journal, "[The Special Assistant for Reality](#)," explores President

Obama's failure to understand the backlash around the airport body searches. As author Peggy Noonan comments, "Wherever you go, there [the bubble] is. And the worst part is that the army of staff, security and aides that exists to be a barrier between a president and danger, or a president and inconvenience, winds up being a barrier between a president and reality."

In the case of the CEO, passing on tasks that involved interactions with the majority of his staff, avoiding his Achilles heel of poor interpersonal skills, worked to his detriment, and his tenure at the company was cut short. For the president, writes Noonan, "the bubble accounts for many of the spectacular blunders presidents make." The more resource-rich we are, the more likely we are to transfer responsibilities to others, and quite frankly, we must. But if you have a hunch that you are delegating to the point of inhibiting your development or assigning your leadership away, probably best to heed that feeling.

3. Are you potentially undermining a project's success by delegating? There are instances when we don't have the skill set needed for a particular project, and it would be folly not to commend the assignment to another. There are also times when we are the best person for the job, and daunted by a project's magnitude because we have the expertise to accurately understand the project's scope, we have the tendency to try to delegate.

As my book has gone to press, I've observed this propensity in myself, first with soliciting blurbs, and more recently with creating the publicity plan. When it came time to ask people to blurb the book, I knew it wasn't an exercise in just going after the most prominent people I could find, but rather those I truly admire, who have influenced my thinking and behavior. If I was to have any hope of success, I couldn't just toss my manuscript across their desks. I needed them to know why I was reaching out, why I admire them, and that is something I couldn't possibly entrust to anyone else.

Then came the marketing plan. I wanted to let someone else handle it. Until my friend Julie Berry, a YA author, told me — you shouldn't delegate this. There are tactical components, which you can farm out. But you have thought through hundreds of plans on how to market a business, a person, or an idea. It's something you do well, and you need to take ownership of this process. It was a great reminder that in this case, I was the right person for the job.

The mythological story of Psyche can provide some guidance in thinking through how and when to delegate. Here's how I think of it: Having been given four seemingly impossible tasks by Aphrodite, Psyche dispatches others to complete several of the tasks, however, in the fourth task there is nothing she can consign. In the first task, she assigns ants to help her sort through a huge jumble of seeds. Having accurately assessed the job — sort seeds into piles — delegating to the ants was a smart tactical move: it's clearly a task for many, rather than for one. In her second task, gathering fleece off of head-butting rams, the reeds in the field help her decide how to collect the fleece without getting attacked by the rams. By using their help to collect the fleece, which symbolizes power, she is shown succeeding by entrusting power to others, rather than by trying to keep all the power to herself. For the third task, Psyche must fill a flask with water from a rushing river alongside a jagged cliff. She lacks the skill to accomplish this, but recognizes that an eagle can help her. She delegates not because she wants to be rid of

the task, but because someone else was better equipped to do the job. The fourth and final task, retrieving a box from the Underworld, was hers alone to complete, as the task wasn't just about obtaining the item, but about the tough decisions that only she had authority to make along the way.

While we know that delegation is an essential management tool, there may be times where you have thought to yourself, "It's just not right to delegate this," and with good reason. Your team may want you to delegate more, but what they really want is for you to know *when* to delegate. At least that's what the ants tell me.

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