

MANAGEMENT
November 3, 2009

BusinessWeek

Seven Sins of Delegating

Just because your CEO is uncomfortable making tough demands on you, it doesn't mean you shouldn't take the initiative on your own

By Ron Ashkenas

Most senior executives expect their superiors to be adept at delegating "stretch" assignments and making sure they're done right. Yet many CEOs and vice-president-level managers lack the gumption to do so.

Why? Despite their high rank, C-suite execs are human beings who want to be liked. Many times they water down assignments, give their people escape routes, or don't hold them accountable for poor performance. My colleague Robert Schaffer first wrote about this inability to delegate in a Harvard Business Review article back in 1974. He called them the "Seven Sins of Demand-making," and the exact same problems exist today:

1. Backing away from expectations, so that a goal really becomes a wish that people can choose to ignore.
2. Engaging in charades, which conveys that the goal is just an exercise you have to do for appearances' sake, but you know it's not really going to happen.
3. Accepting see-saw trades so that if your people take on one goal, they'll get relief from another.
4. Setting vague or distant goals by putting the time frame far out into the future.
5. Not establishing consequences, so it's impossible to differentiate between those who successfully achieve goals and those who do not.
6. Setting too many goals, which allows subordinates to pick and choose their objectives. They may select the most easily attainable goals—not necessarily the most important ones.

7. Allowing deflection to preparations and studies, which delays the moment of commitment to a real goal.

The irony is that most of us actually want to be challenged by our superiors, even if we don't always admit it. A tough goal can be exhilarating; that's why so many people respond effectively to crises. They step up and get things done in ways unimaginable under normal circumstances. It's also why managers report that their most formative and memorable learning experiences are not classes or seminars, but rather special projects or stretch assignments.

Help Your Manager Make Better Demands

So, how can you help your manager make better demands and overcome the Seven Deadly Sins? Here are three steps:

1. Ratchet up the dialogue about improvement: Start by identifying an opportunity that needs to be addressed and that you can tackle. Don't wait for your manager. Take the initiative. Talk with colleagues about what needs to be done and build a consensus for taking action. For example, without being asked, the operations manager for a struggling software company interviewed each of his peers and a number of developers to identify ways to reduce development backlog. He then worked with a few colleagues to choose the most insightful responses, and jointly presented them at a staff meeting. The boss was delighted that his team took the initiative, saying "Of course that's what I expected you to do."

2. Ghost-write an assignment: Once you have your superior's "permission" to tackle an improvement area, shape an assignment for yourself. This serves two purposes. First, it forces you and your boss to have a frank discussion about all of the issues that need clarification (but are usually avoided). Second, it gives you an official written "mandate" you can share with others to get them on board as needed. By providing your own structure, you make it easier for your boss to give you the direction and support you might need.

3. Turn up the heat on yourself: Hold yourself to the highest standards. Set tight deadlines, stretch yourself to achieve more than just incremental improvement, and push for innovation and learning as part of the project. In other words, be your own demand-maker.

For instance, the same operations manager of the software company—as part of reducing the development backlog—took on the challenge of removing wasteful

work from the development community. He mobilized a group of support staff and engineers to focus on reducing the amount of time spent resolving error messages. Spurred by a tight (but self-imposed) two-month deadline, the team figured out a way to save 15,000 hours of wasteful work by adapting an existing tool.

We all have the capacity to achieve more and make greater contributions to company performance. But if your boss is one of the many who struggles with the demands of delegating, you may need to help him or her realize that challenging assignments don't need to be avoided.

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