Effective Delegation Can Impact Organizational Effectiveness

Delegating Not Only Saves Time and Money, It’s a Real Motivator!

By Nicole Burgess, CAE

Delegating tasks to both staff and volunteers is a regular part of what we do as association executives on a daily basis. Given that delegation is so central to the day-to-day work of association management, can we then assume we are probably pretty good at it? The answer arguably is no! While it would seem that we are fairly good at handing off pieces of work to others, we often fail to delegate effectively and strategically. Furthermore, delegation is not a skill that we tend to focus on or even likely think about, yet it is a skill that can potentially be the difference between being a high performing association or not.

The research strongly supports this and indicates that the benefits to proper application of this skill in the long term can be substantial. In his article, the 12 Rules of Delegation, Richard Lannon explains that effective delegation has the potential to save associations both time and money, assist with succession planning and can help to build skills and motivate people. Poor delegation, however, has the potential to cause frustration and confusion. Considering its impact on organizational effectiveness, effective delegation is therefore an important management skill worth examining further.

Delegation Defined

In order to understand how to better apply this skill, it is important to first understand what delegation means. According to Wikipedia, "Delegation is the partnership of authority and responsibility to another person to carry out specific activities. It is one of the core concepts of management leadership." What this means is that delegation involves trusting others. As simple as this may sound, it can be a terrifying prospect for some managers. It involves empowering others to make decisions independently and assume responsibility for certain tasks. Of course, if something goes wrong, the manager is still ultimately responsible. Therefore, effective delegation is of utmost importance.

Contrary to popular practice, delegation isn't just a matter of telling someone else what to do. It also is not about all or nothing. Managers need to recognize that there is and should be varying degrees to which delegation occurs based on the nature of the task and the individual being delegated to. At times this also means that delegation is not so much an action but a process. While simple in theory, this represents an important shift from the traditional understanding of delegation as simply handing off work, and moves it into the realm of coaching and mentoring.

The result is that delegation becomes part of a longer term strategy that has the potential to benefit larger organizational goals by maximizing human resource potential. In other words, effective delegation is central to effective leadership. As a result this presents some potential challenges in regard to the process and time commitment that effective delegation entails.

Barriers to Effective Delegation

When managers fail to delegate, the result is often overwhelming workloads and imminent burn out. Despite these implications, this continues to be a prevalent issue in association management. Why is this the case? There seem to be a number of possible reasons why association managers hold onto their high workloads instead of delegating. It is important to be aware of these potential barriers so that steps can be taken to overcome them.
1) **Can’t Let Go**: It is not uncommon to hear people say, “I have always done this job.” The inability to let go and pass tasks off to others is a common reason why people hold on to work instead of delegating. Furthermore, there may be a perceived threat associated with letting go. The individual may feel that by handing over certain responsibilities and tasks that there will no longer be a need for them. This is a mentality that needs to be overcome since effective delegation means letting go and trusting others.

2) **Lack of Trust**: Another common statement we hear is, “Another person cannot do this job as well as me.” So how does a manager with very high standards delegate tasks they feel they can do better themselves? Gerard Blair, author of *The Art of Delegation* gives the following advice. "When you delegate a job, it does not have to be done as well as you could do it, but only as well as necessary." In other words, the focus should not be on achieving perfection but instead getting the job done sufficiently and hopefully through the process developing the competencies and skills of our people.

3) **Too Much Work**: Too often we hear the statement, “It is easier and faster to do it myself since delegating to others requires more work.” This is a common and sometimes practical reason for why people choose not to delegate. Training another person or team properly and providing the necessary support requires both time and commitment. Overcoming this obstacle requires prioritization and an understanding of the longer term goals and benefits.

So if we agree that effective delegation has the potential to provide substantial benefits for associations, then the next question is how does one effectively delegate?

**Approaches to Effective Delegation**

Just as there are many leadership styles, and one size does not fit all, there are also different approaches and degrees of delegation. In other words, delegation is not an all or nothing process. While there are varying models of delegation out there, there are essentially six key steps that should be involved within any process:

1) **Define and Select Tasks**: The first step is to define the tasks that need to be done and determine which of those tasks are appropriate to delegate. There will of course be tasks and managerial functions that are crucial for a manager to do themselves, in which case delegation would not be appropriate. It is important that a long term view be taken in regard to the selection process. Managers should aim to delegate as much as possible so as to ultimately develop their staff and volunteers to more senior levels and competencies.

2) **Select the Individual (or Teams)**: The second step is deciding who to delegate defined tasks to. Some considerations include the individual (or teams) current knowledge, skills, experience, work style and of course workload. In other words, in order to delegate effectively, we need to first understand our people. It is also important to consider whether the task provides an opportunity to grow and develop their skills.

3) **Assess Training Needs**: Once we have the task and the individual (or team) identified, we next need to assess the training needs, skill levels and ensure certain criteria are met. First the person (or team) needs to know what is expected of them. Second they need to have the
authority to do what is being asked of them. Lastly, they need to know how to do what is being asked of them.

4) **Set Clear Goals, Objectives and Timelines:** Just as in goal setting, delegated tasks are most effective when they are “SMARTER.” This frequently used mnemonic means that they are: Specific, Measurable, Agreed, Realistic, Time-bound, Ethical and Recorded. Setting clear goals, objectives and timelines are crucial in ensuring those we are delegating to are clear on what is expected of them. It also assists in limiting the risk of micro-management.

5) **Ensure Access to Resources and Information:** Effective delegation can only occur if the people we delegate to have access to the information they need to be successful. Controlling and limiting access to pertinent information is always detrimental to any effective delegation process. Ensuring the people we delegate to, whether staff or volunteers, also have access to the necessary knowledge is key.

6) **Ongoing Support, Communication and Feedback:** Lastly, having open, clear and ongoing communication is crucial. Managers need to ensure they are providing accurate and timely feedback on a regular basis. It is important for people to know how they are doing, and whether they have achieved their pre-defined goals. If there are any issues, it is important to ensure that they understand the problem, feel confident enough to carry on, and know how to prevent future problems or mistakes. And when the work is complete, and done well, it is important to take the time to recognize and celebrate success!

**Conclusion**

From an organizational perspective effective delegation serves a dual purpose. First, it helps to ensure that we are maximizing the use of our volunteers and staff in both the short and long term. Second, it provides us with an opportunity to develop our people. The reality is that time is one of the most valuable resources an association has in today’s world. Effective delegation allows us the ability to maximize this time. Therefore an investment in effective delegation processes needs to be seen as an investment not only in our people but also in the long term health and success of our association.

**Words of Wisdom on Effective Delegation**

“Getting things done through others is a fundamental leadership skill. Indeed, if you can’t do it, you’re not leading.”

Bill Zipp, *Delegation is Not Dumping*

“Delegation is a skill of which we have all heard - but which few understand. It can be used either as an excuse for dumping failure onto the shoulders of subordinates, or as a dynamic tool for motivating and training your team to realize their full potential.”

Gerard Blair, *The Art of Delegation*

"Delegation used as a tool develops you and your people...The difference between success and failure is often a matter of letting go and delegating.”
Richard Lannon, *12 Rules of Delegation*

"To delegate effectively, choose the right tasks to delegate, identify the right people to delegate to, and delegate in the right way."