

How to Delegate

(rev. 10/30/2023)

1. Explain the task that you want the person to accomplish. Be sure to be clear about specific deliverables.

2. Have the person explain back to you what they believe is the task and the deliverables. It's amazing and disconcerting how often this step reveals a misunderstanding. Often times, people make the task larger than you actually want it to be. People will embellish the task, perhaps thinking they're going above and beyond, but then you end up only using part of what they produced, or they were off target, or simply wasted a bunch of time.

Inexperienced managers will sometimes struggle with this step, perhaps feeling like it's condescending. However, take responsibility for your own skills and abilities at explaining what you're looking for. When someone works on a project for you, and doesn't produce what you wanted, is that on them, or is that because you didn't explain it well enough.

Skipping this step is responsible for a lot of wasted time, so make the time up front to have the other person explain, in detail, what they believe they're being asked to do.

3. Explain what resources the person can tap into in order to accomplish the task (i.e. can work from home, can take time off other responsibilities, can recruit some specific other people to assist, can purchase a book or other materials, can come back to you with questions or help, etc.).

Don't assume that the person you're delegating to understands the resources they have available to them. Nobody wins when someone comes back to you with an incomplete assignment because they didn't realize they could ask for help from others, or get additional help from you.

4. Establish a deadline. This is often times best done mutually. I've found that people generally don't give themselves enough time. Sometimes there's external factors that determine a deadline, but for a lot of projects, deadlines can be fairly flexible. However, I then explain that if they're going to be late, I expect that they'll ask for an extension.

When someone lets me know that they need an extension, we'll set a new deadline. However, typically I am not interested in why they need an extension. In fact, I really don't want to know why. My assumption is that they've been very busy, that they didn't realize how long a project or tasks would take, or some other reasonable explanation. Unless I see some clear problematic pattern, I'm going to give them the benefit of the doubt. So, usually I don't need to know why they need an extension. I might, though, ask if they need any help or review with them the resources they have or need to accomplish their task.

Sometimes, it's helpful to have deadlines for drafts or for parts of a project. But my assumption is that people are hard workers, and want to be successful at tasks they're assigned or otherwise take on.

5. Feedback – this might be built in somewhere in the middle of the task, but always once the task is complete give the person feedback so that the next time you delegate to them it goes even better. Don't forget to praise the person where that can sincerely be done.