

# The Fine Art of Execution: Getting Results Through the Efforts of Others

*Jo Manion, PhD, RN, NEA-BC, FAAN*

**IN A PREVIOUS COLUMN**, we talked about the importance of effective leadership execution and the ability to get results. It is likely that we have all worked with leaders at some point in our past who are charismatic, articulate, and inspire others with their vision of a desired future. They can influence others to look at situations differently and thus feel motivated to change the status quo. However, when it comes to actually obtaining the desired results, somehow it never happens. There are results, but the results are not the ones intended and may even be negative consequences. For example, the leader has done a good job of getting everyone in the department fired up about the upcoming change initiative. There are high hopes about the possibilities of change. However, the project is handled poorly and fails in execution. Staff members are left feeling demoralized and leery of any future change initiatives, unwilling to volunteer or get on board in even the smallest of projects.

In the previous column about the leader's role in getting results, five strategies related to execution were discussed:

- Identifying and prioritizing the desired key results;
- evaluating outcomes continually;
- managing process effectively;
- capitalizing on followers' strengths; and
- using appreciative leadership tools, such as polarity management, appreciative inquiry, and evidence-based approaches.

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However, one very important skill that was not addressed and can make the difference between success and failure of a project is the leader's ability to delegate effectively to others. This column offers a quick review of the concept and some simple tips that increase your delegation effectiveness. Delegation is really the ability to get the work done through the efforts of others. It does not matter what your position or the situation in which you find yourself working with others to get results, the basic concepts of delegation are the same. The seriousness of failed delegation is determined by the situation. For example, if I am not clear about what *doing the laundry* entails and my husband fails to complete the task to my expectations, it is often a pretty easy fix. And consequences are not usually too severe (except for my silk blouse that turned into a size 2 after he dried it at high heat!). If you are a staff nurse delegating a responsibility to a coworker and is unclear, patient care may be adversely affected. A manager delegating responsibilities within a major change project may experience significant unintended consequences that waste time, increase frustration, and leave others with diminished commitment to the project and even their workgroup. The same principles apply whether you are leading a committee in the workplace or a group of volunteers within your church community or neighborhood.

## Delegation as a Concept

First, let us clarify what is meant by delegation. Many of us have had negative experiences with delegation, and these influence our perception of the concept. It is fair to start by saying that delegation is a relatively straightforward skill. Neither is it dumping the responsibility on someone else nor it is just shifting responsibility. It means that you are allocating responsibility to another, identifying an appropriate level of authority with which the person can carry out the task, and holding the person accountable for the outcome. You always remain accountable for the effectiveness of your

delegation. In other words, if there are problems with the outcome, there may be shared accountability. Perhaps, the individual who accepted the responsibility did not do an acceptable job, or there were significant unintended negative consequences, such as fractured relationships and hurt feelings along the way. The person accepting the responsibility remains accountable for these outcomes. However, the individual delegating also needs to look at their process of delegation to see if there were problems there. Perhaps, a timeline was not identified or there was not enough clarity in terms of what the task entailed.

Effective delegation is a dynamic process and requires certain steps for it to be effective. Most of us have learned to delegate through a process of trial and error, by making some really horrible mistakes and then learning from them. Unfortunately, some of these missteps can be so painful that the individual may say, "I'm just doing it myself next time, I can't count on anyone else!" This is a mistake because you end up feeling unsupported and like you are carrying all the responsibility. It also does not give others the opportunity to grow and become stronger if you hold responsibilities too tightly.

Any leader seeking to delegate authority and responsibility should first review his or her work and decide what to delegate. It is not always just tasks that you find tedious or unpleasant. And, in some cases, it is not appropriate to delegate some functions or tasks to others. For example, a manager has the legitimate authority to hire and fire, that is, make personnel decisions that by organizational standard and employment law ought not be delegated to employees. Perhaps, some specific portions of the hiring process, such as participation in interviews and offering of feedback and recommendations, can be delegated to and requested of employees. In addition, there are functions of leadership that, although others may participate and contribute, the responsibility for that function resides with the leader. I consulted with a nurse executive many years ago and discovered that because she did not like the strategic planning process, she had delegated responsibility for it to a project manager within the nursing department. It did not surprise me that her major issue was that she was not accepted as a credible leader by those reporting to her.

*Tip 1: Be deliberate and thoughtful about what work or tasks to delegate and what to retain as your responsibility.*

Once a decision has been made about what to delegate, now you must plan for the delegation. Too many of us fail to see the importance of a thoughtful plan. We can make the mistake of thinking that delegating is just telling the person what to do. Time taken in careful preparation pays off in massive dividends later. We have all been caught dealing with a huge mess because of ineffective delegation. The project failed to be completed within the necessary time frame, key stakeholders were alienated and lost, or you find that your staff has been polarized to an intolerable degree. The preparation and planning time would have been far less than the hours it can take to clean up a significant problem. And some of the unintended consequences, such as frustration, loss of commitment, hurt feelings, and damaged relationships, may never be fully repaired.

### **Planning for Delegation**

Let us look at elements to be considered in planning your delegation.

- What are the essential details or decisions within the task or function?

There are some instances where you may not understand the entire task you are delegating. If this is the case, you need to stay in close touch with the individual and learn more about the task as it unfolds. You are much more effective as a coach who is delegating responsibility if you understand the key elements and tasks to be accomplished. Try to imagine an effective soccer coach who does not know the rules of the game! In essence, when you delegate, you are the coach for the person accepting the responsibility and you have to know enough about the task to make an intelligent delegation decision.

There may be key stakeholders to be included or essential information necessary to obtain. These must be clarified because you cannot assume that the person accepting the responsibility knows

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