

## DELEGATION: OLD WORDS AND NEW MANAGEMENT

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Many of the words and concepts we use to describe management processes originated in a period of time where values and people were quite different than they are today. The world of work has changed a good deal since the revolution of assembly lines and the early management practices accompanying the factory model of business. Interestingly enough, our words and concepts have not been separated from their historic roots.

Does it matter that we use words/concepts that have "old" meanings? Indeed it does.

**In an era of mining and manufacturing where the factory owners owned not only the machinery, but also the employees, management was a thing done "to" employees in the pursuit of profit.** Management was a process that came with power **over** other people. The management words and concepts we use had as their underpinnings, the idea that owners and their delegates (managers) could and should use power over employees. The resulting words, like performance appraisal, and delegation to choose but two, assume "manager does to employee", under the mandate of power.

In a more modern world that doesn't work. The power that used to be available to owners and managers is now much more limited than in the earlier days of "large scale industrialisation". Laws, unions, and changes in societal values have changed enough so that the route to organisational success runs not through "power over" but through a creation of a cooperating work force. That changes, or at least should change the meanings of our management concepts. If they don't, we have a modern work world that requires cooperation, but within that we have these dangling management methods that **require power that managers do not possess.**

### Delegation - Great Word That Needs Re-Defining

Within the outmoded "manager does to employee" model, delegation has involved the following thinking:

- *"I, manager have much to do and not enough time"*
- *"My time as manager is more valuable than the time of my employees, because I make more money or I'm more valuable"* [Yes, I know this is just a little offensive by today's standards, at least to some, but it reflects old school thinking.]
- *"Therefore I, manager, will have YOU, employee, do the parts of my job that I don't really want to do, because it costs less if you do them."*
- *"While I will delegate unpleasant tasks to you, the employee, I won't delegate to you the authority and autonomy I have, and that is necessary to do the job properly, AND I'll watch over you very carefully."*

This sounds fairly dreadful, and by today`s standards this approach to delegation doesn`t work, or at least ensures that most of the benefits that could be derived from delegation are lost. Perhaps this worked in the "good old days". Maybe it never worked. Often the good old days weren't that good, particularly for people at the bottom of the hierarchy.

### **Modern Delegation Must Be Different**

Modern delegation must be different if it is going to result in benefits. We aren't talking about abstractions like right and wrong, or democracy in the workplace, or even fairness. We're talking about WHAT WORKS in our modern world, where the **assumption of power over does not hold**. In a nutshell, for delegation to work, it must be aimed at different purposes, and use different ways to achieve those purposes. No longer can it be something a manager does TO an employee to lighten the managerial load or dump disliked tasks.

It's interesting that when you shift lenses about delegation, all of a sudden you find multiple powerful benefits from using delegation in a cooperative manner. For example, delegation becomes a way to:

- develop employee skills at little or no cost
- mentor/coach employees to increase employee productivity
- create better understanding between "levels/ranks" within an organisation, and improve teamwork
- optimise managerial time (that`s a goal shared with the "old" view
- prepare and/or test out employees at higher level tasks when promotion is possible
- increase employee engagement

In short, delegation in the modern work world is a key tool to enhance human resources "capital" in ways that benefit the organisation as a whole, manager and employee...**provided it's done cooperatively (WITH, not TO the employee)**.

### **The Catch - Isn't There Always One?**

There's almost always a catch. In this case it's about unconscious legacy thinking [ouch, that's one of those fancy phrases, isn't it].

Back up. It's about managers managing in ways similar to how they were managed when they were rising through the ranks. Almost every manager who moves up brings with him or her, some beliefs that come from the old days, because of this chain of transmitting management culture. Today's manager learnt from their managers who learnt from their managers who learnt.... Of course as time goes on the "old stuff" becomes weaker and weaker, but its remnants remain. That's one reason why some elements of management, for example, performance appraisals, are so dreadful, because they are based on thinking that was pretty poor in the first place, fifty years ago, and is now absolutely nonsensical. Yet, they are still done TO employees. Thus they fail.

Likewise, with delegation, even good, modern managers will exhibit some of the old patterns based on the old assumptions. So, some managers who are otherwise excellent will screw up something as basic as delegating.

When we teach management, or otherwise influence future managers, we need to place into a larger context all of the traditional management techniques, explaining why management techniques must be implemented differently due to how things have changed.

It's important that we help managers uncover their more hidden assumptions about their management approaches so they can examine whether there are any legacy assumptions -- outmoded and ineffective mental models that will create barriers to success.

Above all we need to both understand and teach others that **a word from the past -- say delegation or performance appraisal, cannot mean the same thing that it did**, and that we must evolve our definitions and thinking to reflect that the word is not the thing or process.

*Article courtesy of Bacal & Associates.*

*<http://work911.com/articles/manlead.htm>*