Celebrating the Art of

DELEGATING

You know you can't do it all yourself. You just don't know how not to. Project Management Expert Stan Portny offers some sage advice on the right way to delegate.
It’s tough being a manager in our less-than-booming economy. You have 1,001 tasks on your to-do list, and they’re multiplying exponentially. You know it’s time to embrace the D-word—“Delegate”—but something in you violently resists the idea. You’ve always subscribed to the “If you want something done right, do it yourself” school of thought. But now that you’re having to do more with much, much less, you’re so overworked and stressed out that you must curb your “control freak” ways; the question is, how?

Project management consultant Stan Portny has seen this dilemma many times.

Most of the people I work with came to their management positions because they were really good technically,” he explains. “They’re engineers, researchers, financial analysts. They’ve never been trained in business management issues. So naturally, when they’re put in charge of a project, they have a very hard time delegating authority. Fortunately, there are principles and processes to help project managers learn to delegate—and I think any type of manager can benefit from them.”

Portny says that now, more than ever, managers must get comfortable with delegating. He offers the following tips to help you do it the right way:

**Resolve the psychological and emotional pitfalls of delegating.** When someone is accustomed to doing a task himself, he fears that the person to whom he delegates it may be unable to complete the task to the satisfaction of the key audiences, and he (the delegator) will be held accountable. Furthermore, he may be forced to delegate to someone over whom he has no direct authority—a distinctly uncomfortable position. Plus, the delegator may enjoy doing the work! Recognizing these feelings and finding ways to overcome them are the first steps in successful delegating.

**When assigning tasks, keep the ‘critical path’ firmly in mind.** A critical path is a series of activities on which the completion date of the entire project hinges. If any one of these tasks gets delayed, the overall project is delayed. Most project managers think, “I’ll keep the critical path tasks for myself and give the non-critical path tasks to someone else.” But the reality is that you may have to stop what you are doing in order to deal with problems that arise in the non-critical camps . . . and the completion date gets delayed anyway! The solution, whenever possible, is to delegate criti-
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cal path tasks in a clear, concise manner to a competent person.

Remember the law of comparative advantage. Simply stated, it makes sense for you to spend your time where you get the biggest bang for your company’s buck. Reserve for yourself the tasks you do best and assign the rest to other people. Your ability to do these secondary tasks better or faster doesn’t justify neglecting the tasks in which you can provide the biggest impact.

Define the task clearly—it forces structure. Be precise when communicating the desired outcome to a delegatee. If you ask someone to simply “write a report,” are you prepared to live with the report you’re going to get? You must give the person a very clear description of what you want him to do. This forces you to think through the project up front. Consequently, potential problems make themselves known early on, not six months down the road.

Understand—and clarify—the levels of delegating. Level 1: Get in the know—do some fact-finding for me.

Level 2: Show me how to go—do some fact-finding, formulate some suggestions, and then we’ll talk

Level 3: Wait until I say go—do the steps as in Level 2, then take action when I say to.

Level 4: Go unless I say no—do the steps as in Level 2, then take action unless I say not to.

Level 5: Go and let me know—take action, and let me know what you did.

Level 6: Just go—take action, and I don’t want to hear about it again.
The relationship between you and the delegatee is the same in all instances. You, the project manager, are ultimately responsible to ensure the task is completed successfully. Just be sure the delegatee knows exactly what’s expected of him.

**Put everything in writing.** Delegating in a conversation is not good enough. When you write a memo, you have a paper trail that proves exactly what you asked the person to do. It clarifies your instructions and helps you to hold people accountable for their performance.

**Resist the urge to micromanage.** Looking over someone’s shoulder is an inappropriate way to manage a project. Instead, identify a series of “check points” you can refer to along the way to help you measure how the project is going. If you can work out a way to define what constitutes success, you can start to manage by output, not by process. If you feel that you must “check up” on someone, tell him honestly: “It’s not that I don’t trust you, it’s simply that I don’t have the moment-to-moment involvement that you do. I just want to stay up-to-date on what’s going on.”

**Remember to say “thank you.”** Write a memo thanking the delegatee for his contribution, and copy it to his boss. Also, thank the boss for allowing the
person to participate. This may sound trivial, but it’s amazing what a difference it makes to acknowledge a person’s contribution in this way.

“Delegating is not just a method for reducing your workload and getting a project done,” says Portny “It’s also a great way to develop employees and strengthen the fabric of your company.”

“When you give people a sense of autonomy and the chance to work in a new arena, they’ll grow professionally,” he says. “This can only help your to helping your company prosper is a cornerstone of being a good manager.”

About the Author
Stan Portny, president of Stanley E. Portny and Associates, LLC, is an internationally recognized expert in project management and project leadership. During the past 28 years, he has provided training and consultation to more than 100 public and private organizations.