

To Be a Great Leader, You Have to Learn How to Delegate Well

HBR: Leadership transitions



One of the most difficult transitions for leaders to make is the shift from doing to leading. As a new manager you can get away with holding on to work. Peers and bosses may even admire your willingness to keep “rolling up your sleeves” to execute tactical assignments. But as your responsibilities become more complex, the difference between an effective leader and a super-sized individual contributor with a leader’s title is painfully evident.

In the short term you may have the stamina to get up earlier, stay later, and out-work the demands you face. But the inverse equation of shrinking resources and increasing demands will eventually catch up to you, and at that point how you involve others sets the ceiling of your leadership impact. The upper limit of what’s possible will increase only with each collaborator you empower to contribute their best work to your shared priorities. Likewise, your power decreases with every initiative you unnecessarily hold on to.

While it may seem difficult, elevating your impact requires you to embrace an unavoidable leadership paradox: **You need to be more essential and less involved.** When you justify your hold on work, you’re confusing being involved with being essential. But the two are not the same — just as **being busy and being productive are not necessarily equal.** Your involvement is a mix of the opportunities, mandates, and choices you make regarding the work you do. How ancillary or essential you are to the success of that portfolio depends on how decisively and wisely you activate those around you.

This means **shaping the thoughts and ideas of others instead of dictating their plans**, having a sought-after perspective but not being a required pass-through, and seeing **your own priorities come to life through the inspired actions of others**.

On the surface this advice may sound like common sense; it's what motivational leaders should do. Yet too many of us are in a constant state of overextension, which fuels an instinctive reaction to "protect" work. This survival instinct ultimately dilutes our impact through an ongoing, limited effect on others.

To know if you're guilty of holding on to too much, answer this simple question: **If you had to take an unexpected week off work, would your initiatives and priorities advance in your absence?**

If you answered no or if you're unsure, then you may be more involved than essential. To raise the ceiling of your leadership potential, you need to extend your presence through the actions of others. Regardless of your preferred methodology for delegation, here are four strategies that I've found work for leaders at all levels.

Start with your reasons. When people lack understanding about why something matters and how they fit into it, they are less likely to care. But if you give them context about what's at stake, how they fit into the big picture, and what's unique about the opportunity, then you increase personal relevance and the odds of follow-through. Instead of giving just the business justification, make it a point to share your reasons. You can't motivate somebody to care when you can't express the reasons why it matters to you, so this essential step sets the table for effective partnering. Otherwise, you leave people to come to their own conclusions about what you're asking them to do and why. The risk of misalignment is highest during the first conversation, so make sure you articulate your reasons from the start.

Inspire their commitment. People get excited about what's possible, but they commit only when they understand their role in making it happen. Once you've defined the work, clarified the scope of their contribution, and ensured that it aligns with their capacity, carefully communicate any and all additional expectations for complete understanding. This is crucial when you have a precise outcome or methodology in mind. They can't read your mind, so if the finished product needs to be meticulous, be equally clear-cut in the ask. Once clarity is established, confirm their interpretation (face-to-face, or at least voice-to-voice, to avoid email misinterpretations). "But I told them how I wanted it done!" will not be the reason the ball got dropped; it will simply be the evidence that you didn't confirm their understanding and inspire their commitment.

Engage at the right level. It's essential to stay involved, but the degree matters. You should maintain engagement levels sufficient for you to deliver the agreed-upon mix of support and accountability. However, there are risks when the mix is not right: Too involved, and you could consciously or inadvertently micromanage those around you; too hands-off, and you could miss the critical moments where a supportive comment or vital piece of feedback would be essential. To pick your spot, simply ask people what the right level is based on their style. This not only clarifies the frequency of touchpoints they will find useful but also gives them autonomy in how the delegated work will move forward.

Practice saying "yes," "no," and "yes, if." This is the art and science of being selective. Successful investors don't divert their money into every opportunity that comes their way, so we should be equally discerning with our time. Start by carefully assessing every demand that comes your way, and align the asks with the highest-valued contributions that you're most skilled at making. For those requests that draw on this talent, you say yes and carve out the time and attention to be

intimately involved. But for those requests that don't align, you say yes, if... and immediately identify other people to accomplish the goals through their direct involvement. You may still consult, motivate, and lead — but you're essential as the catalyst, not as the muscle doing the heavy lifting. This discerning approach may mean delegating some tasks to others, negotiating a reduction in your direct contribution, or just saying no while making the business case for why your effort and attention will have a greater impact elsewhere.

To illustrate these strategies in action, consider Anika. The word no was not in her vocabulary, and as a result she involved herself in every team priority. As demand continued to rise, Anika could no longer remain credibly engaged in everything. But since she staked out her territory in the middle, various initiatives began to stagnate. As members of her team stood idly by waiting for some of her precious time to consult on, review, or approve various items, their frustration grew. Anika found herself on the edge of burnout, while confronting a potential loss of credibility with her team.

Anika

The first step for Anika was challenging the definition of her leadership mandate. Up to that point, she defined her core responsibility like this: "I'm the one in charge of getting the job done." As she reflected on this, she recognized it as doer's mindset that lowered the ceiling of her potential impact. The proof was that in recent months her peers were included in various strategic conversations and business development opportunities with senior leaders, yet Anika, with no energy or space for these endeavours, was dealt out of these opportunities to demonstrate her upside.

She recognized that her focus on executing work was not only holding her back from the big-picture work of leading but also was the source of frustration among her junior staff. Although it was uncomfortable, she wanted to start giving them more rope. As Anika considered her obligation to develop others — upskilling, providing tangible leadership experience, and so on — she redefined her leadership mandate to avoid being involved and not being essential: "I lead people, priorities, and projects — in that order — and the work will get done because the right people are focused on the right tasks."

With this refreshed vision, her next step was to reassess her portfolio. She looked at her calendar for the two weeks prior and two weeks ahead, then she counted the hours devoted to each effort (for example, through meetings, working sessions, and conference calls). Once she finished the time count, she ranked each item on a 10-point scale to assess how important the initiative was to the team's overall success.

This two-column exercise quickly revealed a few mismatches where Anika was devoting too much time and energy to priorities that were not in the top five. These were candidates for delegation, so her next step was to consider each team member's unique mix of skills and development needs in order to make an intelligent match regarding who could take on more responsibility. Some of the initiatives could be completely handed off, while others could be broken down into a few smaller pieces in order to involve others without a full transfer of responsibility.

With these new assignments in mind, she devoted 15–20 minutes preparing for each conversation. She brainstormed ways to share her reasons for the change, as well as how she could inspire their commitment. With eight team members, this was a significant investment of time on an already overloaded schedule, but Anika recognized it as a short-term cost to create long-term benefits.

Within a short period of time, Anika became considerably less involved in the details, but she remained essential to the purpose and momentum of each critical initiative. Said differently, her influence was ever-present, but the bottleneck dissolved.

Finally, with the additional bandwidth she created for herself, Anika was concerned that her knee-jerk tendency to say yes could quickly erase the gains. So moving forward she made a commitment to apply the strategy of saying yes, no, or yes, if to new requests in order to avoid diluting her impact through involvement in areas that didn't align with her desired growth and personal brand. And to ensure an objective perspective, Anika asked a colleague to act as an ongoing sounding board for her when the factors were ambiguous and the right answer wasn't evident.

Staying mindful of these four strategies, working out the kinks like Anika did, and becoming proficient at **empowering others to deliver their best builds your capacity to get the job done through the contributions of others**. With this momentum you'll be able to focus on the secondary potential of your deliberate collaboration: to leverage each delegated task as an opportunity for others' development. Then, over time, they too can be more essential and less involved.

Jesse Sostrin, 10 Oct 2017