

# How to Become an Effective Delegator

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A few years ago, my son Alec, who was fifteen at the time, asked me what I do at work. I told him as CEO of Blinds.com, I set the company's strategy, help make people the best they can be, and ensure we execute according to plan. With a puzzled look, Alec responded, "So, you don't really do any actual work."

I assured him that the work I was doing was, ahem, critical to the success of the business. But in a way, Alec was picking up on something important: I've gotten to a point where I can work *on* my business instead of *in* it.

A lot of leaders can't get to this point because they either don't know how to or they're afraid of delegating. Maybe they think it will take too long to train someone effectively, or if they delegate too much, they'll have nothing left to do. And often the more competent they are, the harder it is to delegate. They're afraid the work won't get done at all, or more likely, it won't be done according to their high standards. It's difficult to give up control, especially when you won't tolerate anything less than the perfectionism and high-level performance you expect of yourself.

Trust me, I know because I used to be one of these control freaks. But I reformed and I learned that I couldn't do everything myself. The only way your career - and your business - will grow is by assuming increasingly higher levels of responsibility; the only way you'll have time to do that, without spending your life at work, is to delegate. You have to work on your business and let everyone else work in it.

Want to free up some time and get ahead? Here are five ways to start delegating:

**1. Create a culture where mistakes are tolerated.** All senior leaders must understand that mistakes are acceptable — as long as people learn from them. No one will accept more responsibility, try new things, or risk making a mistake if they get yelled at or penalized. This is essential.

**2. Take the monkey off your back.** Whenever someone comes to you with a question, he takes the monkey off his back and puts it on yours. Don't accept that chimp. Instead, ask, "What do you think?" Tell all your direct reports, and have them tell theirs, that when people want to know how to solve something, they must come with suggested solutions. They should be ready to discuss the factors that should be considered, and provide reasons why one solution seems better than another. Pretty soon people will become more autonomous, feel more empowered, need less supervision, and get people in the habit of thinking critically. That's good input for determining succession planning and promotions.

**3. Ask your direct reports what part of your job they think they can do.** You'll be surprised how readily they'll accept more work when given the chance to choose. And be sure to tell them to ask their own direct reports the same question. This chain creates a process of building skills throughout the organization.

**4. In formal reviews, include a specific rating for delegation.** Do not just mention delegation in passing. It should merit a specific grade. Discuss with managers how they can delegate one-third of their job to one or more of their direct reports. Ask them to develop a specific timeline with the peoples' names to which they'll delegate.

**5. Communicate to your staff that pay increases come only with increased value provided.** Increased value comes not only with increased effort, but with increased assumption of higher-level responsibilities and duties — those duties you might be doing now.

It's so easy to solve others' problems by giving quick solutions, but that makes people dependent on you. The next time your employees ask you what to do, pause, look straight in the eye of the monkey poised and ready to leap on your back, and then simply turn the question back on them.