

Learn to Delegate in order to Grow

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My wife is just learning to accept that there are 4 people doing her job. She runs the company. It's difficult for her to step back and allow others to do what they have to do. What advice can I give her?

Thoughts of the Day: Delegation is essential. Entrepreneurs struggle to overcome their basic instincts of pitching in. Generally people are most highly engaged when they are challenged. Giving up control yields significant rewards for the owner.

Think of the business owner as a juggler. Each day she goes around keeping balls in the air. Building a team of jugglers is key. The group can handle a workload substantially greater than what the owner can juggle alone.

Most business owners are characterized by the entrepreneurial mentality of, “I’m on it, I’ll make it happen.” They step into situations to get things done, to help out, to rescue people who are in trouble, to make things come out right. Unfortunately, that behavior can get in the way of allowing other people to learn how to take on their own juggling load.

It’s better if the owner steps back, lets people try, and teaches them how to recover when they make mistakes. When people ask for help, instead of providing direct answers, this owner needs to ask:

- What do you think you should do next?
- What are your options?
- If you try that, what do you think will happen, and is that what you want to have happen?
- How did you get here, what did you learn that you can apply the next time?

Think of decisions and actions as the balls being juggled. When someone tries to throw a decision the owner’s way, throw it back. Let the original juggler decide, take action and learn.

People down line in the organization can be disruptive. They see the owner as the person in charge, and want contact with the source of power – the ultimate juggler. They throw balls into play, to the owner, past the juggler it should go to, who may lose momentum and focus watching the ball go by.

Redirect down line players to the people they report to. Follow through to be sure they learn how to work with their direct managers. Check that mangers are doing a good job working with their direct reports.

The owner has to practice distance - being aware without being involved. Find out how much each direct report can handle, and how much each of their direct reports can handle. Watch how all jugglers perform, without pitching in pick up the load. Educate, train and coach players so they build their skills.

Some owners shy away from delegating, fearing that their staff will get overwhelmed or resist the additional workload. In fact, most employees today say they don't have enough decision making authority. They are not allowed to contribute as much as they could. And they are looking for greater opportunity to participate and take on additional responsibility.

High levels of engagement happen when people are working to solve meaningful problems. Show people how their tasks fit into the whole. Give people purpose by helping them see the importance of what they are doing.

When new tasks are in play, plan additional time to complete. Allow for errors. Focus on training people to try, recover, learn and build capacity.

When people get overwhelmed, reduce the number of balls they're juggling. Help them to get their stability back. Offload assignments to an interim player. Build confidence by letting people master the load they're juggling before throwing new tasks into the mix.

Through delegation, the organization builds momentum and capacity to perform. The owner is freed up to work more on the business, not so much in it. There's time to observe how everyone is performing. There's time to get away from the business to recharge. There's time to plan what's next.

Looking for a good book? Turn the Ship Around! How to Create Leadership at Every Level, by David Marquet.

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