

Importance and Art of Delegating

By Ed O'Neil, Principal, O'Neil & Associates

As managers move into leadership roles, one of the most difficult things for many of them to do is properly delegate. As most leaders have risen “up through the ranks,” they’re very familiar with all the details of a department’s functions — how everything works and how it is “supposed to be.” However, they are often no longer tasked with personally contributing to the work product or even running the functional area, but in leading. And that is impossible without effective delegation at a level beyond what they did as a manager.

Developing and using good delegation skills is essential to being a successful leader. It saves time, develops individuals on the team, prepares everyone for uncertain times, and serves to motivate and inspire. Most importantly, it provides time for the leader to do the high value work in building relationships, setting directions, creating new approaches, and sustaining a viable culture that is expected of them. But, delegation has to be done in the right way. If done poorly, many of the opposite of these things happen and the effectiveness as a leader declines.

Why Don't “We” Delegate More Often?

Just about every leader can improve their game by improving their delegation effectiveness. This begins by getting insight into what keeps them from delegating more effectively. Here are some common “reasons” for not delegating.

- It is easier to do it myself.
- I don't trust others to do it the right way.
- I lack confidence that it will get done right or on time.
- I am insecure in my position.
- I like doing the technical parts of the job.
- “They” will only be happy if I do this job.
- I like it the way I do it.
- No one has the skills that are needed or my level of experience.
- They don't have time.

But when work is not effectively delegated the whole organization suffers, including the leader that is not delegating. There are the results of faulty delegation:

- Leader works too hard.
- Leader doesn't get the right things done.
- Leader doesn't develop others and misses the use their time and talent.
- Leader does not get around to the “higher end” parts of the job.
- There is no time for reflection or long-term planning.
- Leader does not achieve a sustainable work/life balance.

Leadership Tips

Leadership Tips is an ongoing series produced by the Center for Health Care Strategies' Medicaid Leadership Institute in collaboration with O'Neil & Associates.

The series is designed to provide general guidance to help leadership of state agencies and their senior managers develop and refine the skills and expertise necessary to successfully lead their state programs. To view the full series, visit www.chcs.org/leadership-tips.



Benefits of Delegating Well

The benefits to the **leader** are the reverse of the above results. If the leader delegates easily and with skill, the impact will be significant. They will have more time to get to the priorities of their position. They will also have time to invest in their development and in delegating opportunities for the development of those around them. And they can get back the time needed for moving toward a healthy work-life balance.

Direct reports also benefit from a good regimen of delegation. If delegation is tied to a well-constructed development plan, it can lead to improved skill, better understanding of the work, higher levels of engagement and motivation, and greater overall satisfaction.

The **larger organization** also benefits as the people that make up the team are being deployed at their highest level of performance. A well thought through delegation and development plan is also the foundation of succession planning for every position on your team, including the leader. Teams, units, and groups that have an effective delegator as a leader make better decisions, communicate more easily, and have higher levels of productivity and satisfaction, and lower incidence of burnout and turnover.

How to Delegate Well

Understand what is being delegated — This might sound ludicrous, but it is likely the case that things that are ready for delegation are things the leader could do in their sleep, so they may not be as aware of the nature of the work as they were the first time they did it. To improve, the leader needs to put themselves in that beginner frame of mind and recall important skills, valuable context, and underlying anxieties that were faced, and give the person receiving the task a heads up on them. It is also really useful to ask how much of this is **task delegation** and how much is **responsibility delegation**. Always be stretching toward the responsibility end.

Understand personal delegation strengths and weaknesses — Much of this is related to the level of self-awareness of the leadership profile. As a leader, do you focus more on the people or the work? Are you more creative or buttoned down? Do you tend to be anxious when losing some control of a situation? Do you like to be leading from the front of the room or behind others? The more you know yourself, the more effective you will be in the next two steps of delegation.

Tailor the delegation to them — There are three considerations here. First, what are the strengths and capacities that are needed for this task, and how much risk is involved? The delegation may need an experienced perspective, so giving the delegation to a novice will not be a good choice, even if they might have a great stretch opportunity. Second, knowing something about the leadership style of the person to receive the delegation will make things more successful. Do they like a lot of direction or less constraint? Are they naturally an open communicator or do they need prodding to offer details? Finally, some insight into how this person learns best will make the delegation better, and also enhance what they learn from the experience. Are they more experiential or do they do better when they are fully prepared? Do they learn better visually or verbally?

Tie it to their development — The best way to share a delegation is in the context of giving another person the chance to learn a new skill or try on a new role. Every delegation will not have a significant development dimension, but most have more than we typically think. The only way to uncover this is by being clear about the development priorities of the people that work for you. Having a development list for each direct report that is focused, tied to assessment of performance and goals, aligned with unit, group, and company goals — shared and transparent — is an essential step in effective delegation. Not every aspect of a delegation will have development potential but try to make at least a third to a half of every delegation be a stretch assignment. For more assistance on developing others [check this out](#).

Communicate — Be crystal clear on what and when, with less emphasis about how. Establish timeframes, goals and sub-goals if needed, and how the project will be measured. An important part of this is making sure that the person that has received the delegation knows how much information they need to share about their progress, how often and in what format — i.e., email updates or face-to-face summaries. At first be clear and descriptive about what is needed. As their work on the delegated project develops, switch to questions that guide them and draw out their

critical thinking skills. One important step that is often skipped is the de-brief. A few minutes to review lessons learned, problems encountered, improvement in self-knowledge and the always useful “What would you do next time,” will multiply the value of the delegation for them and their performance in the next delegation.

Get out of the way — Better development is possible if the direct report is able to be as independent as possible and the supervisor receives what they need. To do this be sure that as delegator you:

- Give the person a whole task to do.
- Ensure the person understands exactly what you want them to do.
- Provide the resources and authority to get the work done.
- Share your vision with them.
- Identify milestones when you want feedback about progress.
- Identify the measurements or the outcomes desired.
- Encourage them along the way; let them know how you see it good and bad.
- Thank and reward them when it is over.

Improving delegation skills is a quick way to make substantial improvements in leadership effectiveness.

About Ed O’Neil

Ed O’Neil, PhD, MPA, is the owner of O’Neil & Associates, a management consulting and leadership development firm focused on change and renewal in the health care system. He was previously professor in the Departments of Family and Community Medicine, Preventive and Restorative Dental Sciences, and Social and Behavioral Sciences (School of Nursing) at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). At UCSF, he served as the director of the Center for the Health Professions, a research, advocacy, and training institute that he created in 1992. His work over the past three decades has focused on changing the US health care system through improved policy and leadership. To learn more, visit www.oneil-and-associates.com; contact Ed O’Neil at herringoneil@gmail.com.

About the Medicaid Leadership Institute

The *Medicaid Leadership Institute*, an initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation led by the Center for Health Care Strategies, helps Medicaid directors develop the skills and expertise necessary to successfully lead their state programs in an ever-changing policy environment. In addition, CHCS *Medicaid Academies* provide policy and leadership training for senior Medicaid staff as well as colleagues across partnering state and county agencies. Ed O’Neil has advised numerous MLI Fellows and Medicaid senior managers over the past decade. To learn more, visit www.chcs.org/medicaid-leaders.

Leadership Tips is reprinted with permission from O’Neil and Associates.