Strategic Delegation:

The Key to Increased Productivity and Higher Performance

By John W. Myrna

Most CEOs dream of running an organization in which all managers spend the majority of their time improving the business rather than working in the business. These CEOs also wish their employees would perform at their highest potential, take personal responsibility for roles and outcomes, and be held accountable for results. In sum, these leaders of industry want to optimize—not just maximize—productivity, performance, and profitability from every individual.

Fortunately, there is a management tool to accomplish this: strategic delegation of tasks is the key to optimizing the value of each employee's output.

Without proper delegation:

- Time management becomes a problem.
- Top performers cannot handle more highpotential activities.
- Individuals attempt to accomplish too much and get burned out or demotivated from their excessive workload.
- Quality of work diminishes dramatically and deadlines are missed.
- Opportunities to create meaningful and rewarding assignments for each staff member are overlooked.

Regrettably, few business schools recognize delegation as a high-priority management skill, and even fewer companies spend much time training their managers in the fine art of delegation. Consider the findings of a study conducted in 2007 by the Institute of Corporate Productivity (i4cp). (The study, *The Time Management Practitioner Consensus Survey,* was conducted by i4cp in conjunction with HR.com in June 2007.) This research found that more than half (53 percent) of the 332 companies surveyed had a "somewhat high" or "high" level of concern about time-management skills, and 46 percent worried about delegation skills. However, less than half (49 percent) offer programs for time management, and a mere 28 percent do so for delegation training.

It's possible that the low number of training programs on delegating is partially caused by the reduction in training budgets during the current downturn, but there is another primary reason: few companies truly understand the value of teaching delegation skills, understanding why managers fail to delegate, and what they can do to encourage more strategic delegation.

In any phase of the economic cycle, delegating tasks down the line is essential. In a down cycle, however, when many organizations have cut

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staff dramatically, knowing how to effectively delegate and optimize the efforts of everyone in the organization is critical.

OBSTACLES TO DELEGATING WORK

Our informal research shows that organizations that require managers to "delegate down" are increasing their overall productivity beyond the 25 to 33 percent rate that is the average for most companies. As a result, they are beating their competition without making additional investments in people, programs, and systems. This alone would seem enough motivation for most organizations to make delegating a priority. However, even in companies where top executives take delegating seriously, something prevents managers from following through.

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One of our client CEOs raised this exact concern before a recent two-day strategic planning meeting: "Why don't my managers delegate? They're limiting our growth." The CEO told me, "Changing this behavior must be a priority in our planning session."

In order to change this behavior, the first step is to understand what prevents managers from delegating the way they should. There are four typical reasons:

1. **They don't believe that you really want them to do it.** This is largely a communication issue. Individuals need to hear on a continual basis that you expect them to manage their priorities and delegate effectively. Here are some stumbling blocks to their hearing that message:
   - ❑ If the company's focus is purely tactical and dominated by firefighting, there is probably little investment in people for the long term—something that is required if you are encouraging delegating tasks. Because the delegation of new tasks often takes more resources and more effort—and may result in somewhat lower quality of output initially—only companies planning for the long term will be willing to pay this price to invest in the development of their staff.
   - ❑ If the actions of senior management are inconsistent with their words, employees will pay attention only to the actions. For example, every time senior management wants quick answers to extremely detailed questions—answers that can be provided only by the person handling the task—then middle-level managers are not likely to delegate that task to their subordinates. Likewise, every time senior management penalizes managers for tactical missteps made by a manager's delegatee, it reinforces the notion that the managers should have done the work themselves.
   - ❑ If senior management has no tolerance for the learning curve that is expected in delegating a task, then delegation won't happen. In Malcolm Gladwell's book, *Outliers* (2008, Little, Brown and Company), the author documents studies that prove it takes 10,000 hours of experience to completely master a skill or knowledge area. It's an important reminder that every master had to learn his or her trade one hour at a time, beginning with the first hour.
2. **They don't want to do it (or, more likely, they don't recognize the value of doing it).** Fear and lack of confidence may be why managers are holding onto their "secret sauce." Some are so paranoid that they may think this requirement to delegate tasks is a secret agenda to replace them with a cheaper, younger resource. (One of our clients discovered this when instituting a policy of paying for "piece work." Many of his workers, who figured out how to generate higher volume, were keeping their techniques secret in order to do better than their colleagues—a direct violation of the concepts of lean management.)

Managers need the motivation to delegate as well as the information that will help them understand why delegation and personal accountability are important. Managers believe they are not being paid to have others "do their job." Stated another way, many managers don't believe that developing others is part of their job. (Whenever our clients have promoted "top guns" to be managers, they have found out that the newly promoted managers don't manage. Instead of working on the business and developing their people, they act "heroically" and do everything themselves.)

For example, I once worked with a vice president of marketing whose management concept included the following behavior: whenever there was a problem with Exxon, our largest client, he flew to Texas, "fixed the problem," and talked with his Texas branch manager only long after the fact.

Managers believe it will take too long to delegate. If it takes longer to delegate, why not just do the task themselves?

Some managers also want to "retain control" by doing the tasks themselves. To counter this, we teach our clients that there are other ways to exert control. For example, you can require a plan up-front and review it before granting permission to execute. Even better, by providing sustained feedback after each step in the project, you can help the delegatee quickly learn how to meet your expectations.

Managers often believe that they personally can do the best job and are further convinced that only they can do the job right. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Every time they do the job, they get even better at it, and so they remain the "best" people to do the job in the future.

They don't want the extra work that comes with delegating tasks. It's easier for managers to do it themselves or depend on a couple of go-to people rather than developing someone else.

Managers sometimes believe they have no one good enough to delegate tasks to. They may also believe others in the organization don't have the right attitude and aptitude. (We tested this belief with one of our clients. This management team was surprised to learn that many of their employees were demonstrating leadership and other skills in church, scouting, and community groups. They would have been glad to take on similar challenges at work—if anyone had cared to ask them.)

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Managers actually don't have anyone to delegate to because they hire only people who are less adept than they are. Why do they do this? Many managers are worried—and therefore don't want to take a chance—that someone might have the capability to do a better job than they do. When I was running larger firms, there were two reasons I would fire managers on the spot. One was when they consistently hired people less skilled than they were. (If every manager on every level hires people less qualified than himself or herself, it won't take long before you have a company of imbeciles!) The other situation was when managers told me they were "irreplaceable." I replaced them on the spot.

3. **They don't know how to do it.** Managers must be given training and development opportunities in the delegation skill sets. (Delegatees also need training to learn new things and get comfortable with allowing their managers to assess their progress.) Management must realize there are some costs to mandating more delegation. For example, there is a cost associated with investing time as a mentor/ coach. Also, initially, results may be lower quality and less timely than if the manager performed the task. However, if the manager is very busy, even if the delegatee takes twice as long as the manager to deliver the result, it may still be half the time it would have taken the manager to get to it.
4. **Managers don't have a structure/path to follow.** They need a system to size, shape, and sustain progress.

Managers and delegatees need to understand the difference between delegation and abdication. The manager remains accountable for the successful outcome, and the delegatees must earn the authority to operate without close follow-up. The manager must accept and allow the delegatee to implement a task based on his or her competencies if there is to be any productivity. You might as well do the task yourself if you micromanage by not only specifying the outcomes, but also the precise way that the outcomes are accomplished. Simply stated, it's OK for the delegator to specify the final outcomes and measures but not the exact path to achieve those outcomes.

Many delegation attempts fail because the manager insists the delegatee do it his or her way or not at all. The good news is that it's many, many times easier to specify an outcome than the details of the action steps required to produce that outcome. If asked, of course, you can explain how you would do it.

Managers must delegate most of their tasks using the model of a chief surgeon, who focuses on the critical aspect of the task that only he or she is competent to perform and then hands over the rest of the critical tasks to the assistants in the operating and recovery rooms.

Managers must learn that delegating their highest-value tasks—the A and B tasks— creates the best return. Delegating only your C and D tasks is a waste of time. Finishing those tasks delivers very low return on investment (ROI)—that's why they are C and D tasks to start with.

My company devised the Progress Accelerator Model to provide a systematic means to delegate, remain in control, and guarantee the quality of the outcome. See Exhibit 1.

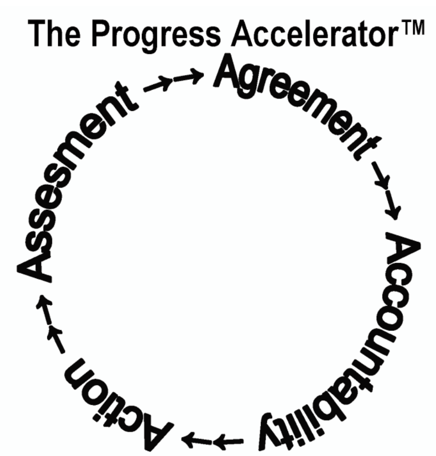

Exhibit 1 – The Progress Accelerator

THE PROGRESS ACCELERATOR

Delegation and execution can be accelerated with a continuous cycle of four steps: agreement, accountability, action, and assessment.

Agreement is the first phase in the cycle. It is necessary to agree on the priority of issues, tactical approach, and expected outcomes among the appropriate stakeholders. At a strategic level, this agreement is best reached between the CEO and the senior team during a two-day meeting and documented in the strategic plan. At a tactical level, reaching this agreement can be as simple as the huddle football players hold before every play.

Accountability refers to personal accountability or responsibility for completing a task and producing the agreed-upon outcome. Whether for a tactical action step or key result measure, one (and only one) person must be designated to be accountable.

Action is tactical. It is a burst of activity that moves us closer to the desired outcome. One person is personally accountable for making sure it happens. There is a specific time period during which it will be completed. (Texas Instruments called this the W3 model—What will get done, Who will be accountable to make it happen, and When will it be completed.)

Assessment is accomplished in a meeting. To assess tactical actions, these meetings could be a daily, weekly, or monthly huddle that starts with a question about what may have been learned about previous plays, weak spots, and so on. Strategically, senior management needs to close out the year's strategic goals during an annual two-day assessment meeting. Closing last year's goals requires that management identify where the status quo has actually changed, and evaluate the success at achieving goals.

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As an organization continuously moves through these four phases, the rate of progress accelerates. Like a giant flywheel, it takes a lot of energy to get it moving, but once it's moving, even a small amount of sustained energy makes it go faster and faster.

STRATEGIC DELEGATION

Each phase of the Progress Accelerator™ model should be considered so that a strategy for delegating evolves. For example, as mentioned previously, the first phase in the model is agreement, and the first agreement reached must be on what to delegate.

Agreement on What Tasks to Delegate

Breaking tasks into prioritized groups is a well-proven time-management process. (Prioritization is based on the Pareto principle, which suggests that about 20 percent of our tasks deliver 80 percent of the value.) It is important, therefore, to prioritize tasks based on their ability to deliver value and itemize the most significant tasks to the less significant.

Stated another way, before managers decide what to delegate they must take all their potential tasks and assign them to one of the following groups:

A. A task that must be done or it will result in serious consequences;

B. A task that should be done, but it has only mild consequences;

C. A task that is something that would be nice to do but without significant consequences it if weren't done; or

D. A task that is something that could be eliminated altogether and it wouldn't make any real difference.

Among the hundreds of executive teams with whom I've worked, I have encountered several who firmly believe that delegation is a waste of time. Here's a comment from the director of operations of a pharmaceutical manufacturer that is typical of what I've heard: "I had an administrative assistant once, but I ended up spending more time explaining to him what to do than it was worth. It was better to just not get the work done than have to explain what I wanted." The problem for the director of operations was that he was delegating only C and D tasks—the ones he could never find the time and priority to get to. Yet, as the company grew, the bottleneck was in getting the A and B tasks done.

The key is that all managers should be working on delegating parts of their A and B tasks. There will never be a high enough ROI to sustain delegating the C and D tasks. The personal effort required to delegate C and D tasks is equal to that for the A and B tasks, albeit without the return.

Agreement on What Subtasks to Delegate

Target and take a good look at your A and B tasks. You will always be the most productive when you are focused on the things that only you can do. The question is, what subtasks of your A and B tasks can only you do? Referring back to the model of the chief surgeon, he or she can contribute to five times as many quality operations by restricting his or her direct involvement on the critical 20 percent of an operation. As the competence of the surgeon's interns grows, he or she can focus on the 20 percent of that 20 percent (i.e., the most critical 4 percent of an operation). That increases the impact the surgeon can make by another factor of five—that is, the surgeon can be 25 times more effective than if he or she performed the entire operation.

We had a manufacturing client specializing in point-of-sale displays. He struggled to recruit sales reps. Not only was the market specialized, but it also took months for anyone new to fully master the company's complex line. We asked each sales rep, "How many hours a week do you actually spend selling?" The answer was a startling ten hours. The other hours were spent following up on sales, filling out the paperwork for the order, making sure the plant did the job correctly, generating reports, and the like. Adding another sales rep, then, would add only another ten hours a week of selling.

The company took an alternative approach. The company identified a potential delegatee, one who could relate to both the sales reps and the plant. With training and coaching, the delegatee was able to assume responsibility for managing the plant, taking it off the plate of the sales reps. By further streamlining the order entry and reporting function, in addition to naming this assistant, each sales rep more than doubled his or her amount of selling time. This had the immediate effect of doubling the effectiveness of the sales force, all without having to recruit and train new sales reps! (We've used this as a standard approach to resolve other companies' bottlenecks in sales, product development, and engineering, jobs where there is a very specialized skill with major impact that is hard to recruit.)

The president of a manufacturer of plastic liners and sealants, for example, also wanted his team to spend more time working on the business, rather than in it. We set a target of 20 hours/month for each executive. We had each member of the team identify five things he or she believed each other team member could delegate to someone else with the total potential to free up 20 hours a month of their time. Each executive then took his or her combined list of suggested tasks, identified which tasks could truly be delegated, estimated the hours he or she spent on each, and delegated them. Within six months, each executive was spending much more time working on the business!

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Manage Expectations

Make sure stakeholders of each delegated task clearly understand expectations and key measurements. Before moving to the next phase, make sure you have asked and answered the following four questions:

1. Is it real? (Is this a self-contained task that occurs on a regular basis?)
2. Can the delegatee do it? (Is the required level of competence achievable?)
3. Can he or she win? (In the world of competing resources, can he or she actually win?)
4. Is it worth it? (Will the payback be sufficient for both delegator and delegatee?)

Accountability and Personal Responsibility

For every task that is delegated, so must be the responsibility for the quality of the work. For example, a machine operator may have been in an environment where the supervisor or quality control manager is accountable for quality. The operator runs the machine and waits for someone else to tell him or her whether the parts created in the process are acceptable. Alternatively, delegating responsibility for the quality of the worker's output to him or her shifts responsibility to someone closer to the facts on the ground and frees up time for the supervisor and the quality control manager.

Another task to delegate is every employee's own annual performance review—making sure it's scheduled, creating the paperwork, and so on. Accountability and responsibility can be closely related. To solve the responsibility/authority issues, it helps to organize each job in the form of an authority table (see Exhibit 2).

From where does authority derive? It is earned by the employee's demonstrated competence. To be worthy of having more meaningful work delegated to them—or to be promoted or hired for new positions—employees must have the competence to exercise a high level of authority for their major responsibilities, which comprise, usually, a minimum of "inform" and "act independently" responsibilities. Other activities can function at a lower authority level—that is, at the "ask," and, ideally, "propose." Most organizations can't function with too many individuals in positions where they need to wait until told what to do.

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Identify the competencies required to handle the responsibility and be accountable. Identify any formal training required and execute it. Then set up an on-the-job mentoring process. Book and classroom learning is merely an enabler—it's the application of that learning that builds experience. For example, my daughter Kathern is a doctor of veterinarian ophthalmology. After 15 years of higher education and training, she still masters new responsibilities by working with excellent mentors. The old doctor's adage—watch one, do one, teach one—can be applied to all professions.

A doctor doesn't turn to an intern who has never done cataract surgery and say, "Good luck—let me know how the surgery turns out." That would be abdication. Instead, the doctor verifies that the intern has mastered the book/school learning and then has the intern watch as the doctor performs the operation. Then, over time, with future patients, the doctor delegates increasing portions of the procedure, reserving the most critical subtask for himself or herself. Along the way, the doctor keeps asking questions, moving the intern up the accountability table—asking what the intern would recommend, debriefing the intern's actions, and ultimately granting the intern the authority to act independently. It is an exciting day when the chief surgeon turns to the intern and says, "I've got a meeting I have to attend—I know you can take care of it." Note again, delegation is not abdication; it's a process that develops and verifies an employee's competence to be trusted with the responsibility and authority.

Action

Action is tactical—specific steps completed in the here and now (i.e., within a day, week, month, or, at most, 90 days). Moreover, each burst of action to be completed within a specified time frame should be associated with a named individual who feels personally accountable. It is useful to create a short list of key action steps in a simple table (see Exhibit 3 for an example).

The basic rule is just before defining and initiating each action step ask yourself: Where will this put me in the future? Where will I be within one quarter (90 days—the tactical time frame)? How much closer will I be to the desired outcome? Will it move me quickly enough? Am I using the best information and resources available today? Is the action consistent with where we expect to be by year-end? Is the action consistent with our organization's long-term strategy? The delegatee's action steps are a key tool in avoiding abdication. They provide a mechanism for the manager doing the delegation to verify that the delegatee has planned action steps consistent with achieving the desired outcome.

Assessment

Assessment should be an ongoing process that occurs during formal and informal meetings. There is never a good time to have an assessment

Authority Table™

Levels of authority for each responsibility each level of **authority** derives from demonstrated, or assumed, **competence**	1 ***Wait*** until told what told	2 **Ask** for direction	3 **Suggest** action	4 **Inform** after acting	5 **Act** independently
Responsibility 1				√	
Responsibility 2				√	
Responsibility 3			√		
Responsibility 4			√		
Responsibility 5		√			

√ Identifies minimum authority/competence required to fulfill each responsibility

Exhibit 2. Tracking Authority and Responsibility

meeting. The best approach we've found is to schedule a series of meetings and lock them into everyone's calendar. These are dates that are blocked from other tasks.

The nature of the task, how much risk there is, and the relative competence of the delegatee determine the frequency of assessment. For example:

❑ Once or twice daily, 10–15-minute formal huddles for critical tasks;

❑ Weekly or monthly formal one-on-ones with multiple delegatee-initiated ad hoc get-togethers for most delegated tasks; and

❑ Quarterly and annually for truly strategic goals.

One of our clients had the opportunity to win a major contract that would provide a dependable, sustainable, monthly revenue. This contract had significant strategic value for a company previously dependent on month-to-month sales. Winning the contract required significant action by every department. Management held a short morning huddle to assess current progress and make sure everyone on the team was clear about what actions were required and expected. And, by the way, the company won the contract.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The secret to successful delegation can be as simple as following the guidelines below:

❑ Hire the right people, the people with the attitude and aptitude to become personally accountable for more and more as time goes on.

❑ Delegate A and B priorities from your to-do list, not the C- and D-level priorities that don't have enough ROI to justify getting done anyway.

❑ Focus on specifying the results required rather than the means to produce those results.

❑ Increase the focus on your time on the activities that create the greatest value for the company and that only you can do.

❑ Transition to being an architect and coach—working on the business rather than in the business.

Remember that if you don't delegate, you can't be promoted and the company can't grow. The ultimate fate for any manager who believes he or she can become irreplaceable by not delegating is to be replaced by a CEO accountable for his or her company's growth.

Exhibit 3. Action Table

What action will be completed?	Who's accountable?	When will it be finished?
Establish prioritized list of target companies	John	Within one week
Contact and qualify targeted companies	Maria	Within 30 days
Schedule and complete presentation to top 205 of prospective companies	Kate	Within 90 days