

A Fundamental Leadership Principle—Why Not Follow It?

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A good leader should delegate authority and responsibility equally, while retaining ultimate accountability. This is a fundamental principle: the good leader ensures that a follower assigned a responsibility for a task, large or small, is also given the administrative, resource, information, and other required operational support-- and the genuine authority within the organization— needed for successful achievement of the task. Too much authority is unnecessary and might lead to counterproductive abuses of power. Too little authority puts unfair pressure on the person given the responsibility, hindering her ability to succeed. Authority and responsibility need to be equal.

This rather simple principle goes back not--just to Henri Fayol, the father of modern management theory-- but to the dawn of time. Most basically, it is a matter of common sense and fairness. However, why don't we follow it? My management and leadership students admit they are poor delegators. They know the principle and are convinced it is correct, and that it works. This is why many identify their chronic inability to delegate and empower properly as their greatest, and personally most troubling, weakness as a practicing leader. In turn, we can be frustrated by our leader's weakness in delegating. As an experienced academic department chairperson responsible for overseeing the design, development, and offering of a course curriculum for educating college students, I am hindered when administrators micromanage, instead of allowing me to administer the policies and solve the problems that arise. You can think of other examples from your own experience. Perhaps you are one of the fortunate few who have not been given some job responsibility by a superior without the appropriate degree of authority. But, perhaps not.

You might be able to recall some positive examples, as well. One comes from God, who knows this delegation principle and in His perfection exemplifies it. The New Testament gives the history of God's strategy for starting and prospering the Christian Church. God laid the foundation in the redemptive sacrificial work of Christ on the cross. He then delegated the responsibility for establishing His church to men called to take the gracious gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world.

“And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, ‘all authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’”
(Matthew 28:18-20; also see Mark 16:15-20.)

The ignorant, sinful, and fearful eleven remaining disciples had been trained for their future responsibilities, but they knew they were not up to this great task. God chose to empower them with the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49). God did not shield them from difficulty, hardship, and death (John 21:17-19) in carrying out their responsibility, nor did He micromanage. God chose not to reveal all the details of His plan although He intervened to provide guidance at critical times (for examples, see Acts 9 and 16:6-10). Although empowered with the mind of Christ, the apostles and other witnesses and future martyrs still had to exercise their free wills in deciding what to do and where to go, being free to differ over tactics, disagree with one another, make mistakes, and

submit to various temptations. They were not made into superheroes, at least not in the comic book sense. But being made new creations in Christ and accompanied by the ever present Spirit of Christ, they were given enough authority and genuinely empowered (see Titus 2:15) to the degree needed to meet their assigned responsibilities magnificently. Because of the extraordinary nature of the task, the Holy Spirit provided Christ's representatives with healing and other miraculous powers, to the extent needed to confirm their authority. These men and women were not overly exalted, however, but succeeded when they acted in proper humility (Luke 10:17-20). God remained in sovereign control, and thus ultimately accountable, but He chose to use mortal men and women by delegating the right amount of authority and responsibility (in equivalent proportions).

This was not an innovative leadership approach. God showed the proper way to delegate from the very beginning in his original Creation account (Genesis 1:27-28). He delegated great authority to humans over all of creation, although limited by one negative command (Genesis 2:15-17). He did not choose to micromanage, but allowed men and women the free will to choose and act, even if the result were to prove disastrous, as indeed it did, leading to the Fall. As the perfect, compassionate, and gracious ruler, God would rectify the errors of his subordinates through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. But as a leader, He did not intervene with man's operational decisions, even though He had the power to do so and could foresee the consequences of man's incorrect choices.

Nor is the principle of proper delegation just for Christians. It is a creation ordinance, something that works well for all people in various social organizations. For example, we can learn from the example of the Egyptian Pharaoh who put Joseph over all the land of Egypt, subject only to his own power of the throne (Gen. 41:39-42). Pharaoh knew how to delegate.

Are you a good enough leader to learn and apply this lesson? We are not perfect and so cannot expect to be perfect leaders. But the best way to lead is by delegating properly, assigning responsibilities and empowering with the corresponding adequate level of authority. Moreover, we need to retain the ultimate accountability to accept blame for our subordinates' lapses and to award them the praise and recognition, even in those cases when we have had to make some repairs. Are we good enough leaders to follow the fundamental principle of delegation?