

Jim's Profit Accelerator 31: Swim, Don't Sink: Delegate Your Way to Success

The problem with problem solving is that it feels so right. Who doesn't want to dig in, right wrongs, and improve things? We've all seen it, and we've all been there at times ourselves. It's tempting to hang on to our technical roots and participate in the solution to every problem. (Well, except obvious outliers like IT and HR.) We do this at our own risk because allowing ourselves to get mired in problems is the best way to drown—ourselves and our businesses.

Here's the test to see whether you're at risk of drowning. When you spot a problem in the business, what do you think your #1 job is? Choose the answer that best fits your response:

1. Consider some solutions before you consider delegating
2. Define the problem
3. Pick the lead problem solver

A winning CEO picks the problem to be solved and a person to solve it. The solution sometimes requires review and advice. Leave it at that.

This is delegation, and it is an essential leadership skill—your life vest that will keep you from drowning. Power delegation drives success in these critical areas:

1. Accountability
2. Scaling
3. Succession

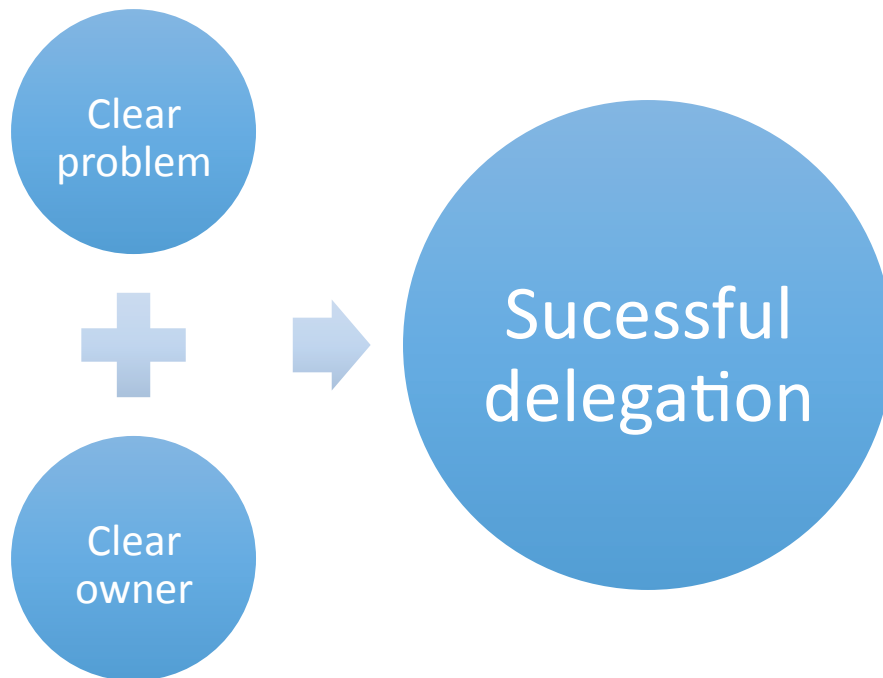
Accountability

Instead of checking for success at the end of a project, delegate properly at the beginning. The trajectory of the task is more likely to land on target if it's aimed right from the start, instead of relying on mid-course correction.

Here's how to tie accountability and delegation. Delegation is like a pass in football or soccer—it doesn't count unless the receiver has possession of the ball and keeps it. That's "ownership," with personal responsibility to do something with it.

Think about delegation and problem solving like this:

- If the problem is clear, but ownership is vague, there is friction and blame.
- If the problem is vague but ownership is clear, there is wheel spinning.
- If both the problem and the owner are vague, there is denial.
- If the problem and the owner are clear, there's a path to success!



As the leader, the delegating task is to define the problem and the ownership. This allows you to focus on your own priorities and at the same time helps your people to succeed. When they understand the issue they're responsible for, then they are free to solve it. Do that, and everyone is swimming, and no one is at risk of drowning.

Scaling

Scaling is a fancy word for building your organization's capability to sustain profitable growth. More than just timing, it demands a system that cascades skills and responsibility outward from the leader, and downward into the organization to the lowest level that can deliver excellence.

The skill for the leader is not just letting go but helping to build a system that rewards and enables constant delegation, while demanding excellent results. Here, it's the delegation system, not delegation itself, that's key to success.

General Motors CEO Mary Barra famously abolished the company's 10-page dress code after saying the following to a department manager: "You have a \$10 million budget and 20 employees, and you have to call me to decide what your team can wear? I'm sure you'll come up with an appropriate answer." She redirected that manager's effort to work that impacted results, and away from wasteful process. And she helped increase that team's production capacity.

Succession

Especially in mid-size businesses, leaders mistake a succession plan for the creation of an adequately skilled person to replace them when they step out the door. Here are the risks:

- Inadequate course correction by unskilled leadership will damage the business. This is the error of believing that excellent plans won't require adjustment as they are implemented. Strikingly, the same leader who judged his leadership as adequate because he made needed course corrections, suddenly loses the common sense that served him so well.
- Vestigial power in the prior leader will contaminate the decision process after she leaves. That is, the common question will be, "What would SHE have done?" This over-the-shoulder hesitation kills the rigorous debate and commitment that success demands when tough problems raise their heads (and they will).

A specialty steel fabrication business served its customers in the auto manufacturing industry successfully for 30 years. Three years after "dad" left the business, key floor leaders torpedoed a critical workflow change because it would destroy the way "he" set it up!

The key to succession is to systematically grow the next generation of leaders with these techniques:

- Move discrete responsibilities to next generation leaders. Give them the whole responsibility, and let them fail more than you're comfortable with.
- Pass on progressively more complex responsibility, with increasing risk to the business.
- Create or empower a management team to provide review and oversight to reduce risk and ensure that critical problems are addressed head-on.
- Aggressively challenge delayed response to problems.

The biggest risk to a winning succession is a leader who lets go too slowly.

Two Secrets to Making Delegation Work

Busy leaders (aren't we all?) regularly try the next new way to manage the fire hose of demands.

Delegation is a popular idea, and, as I've said here, it's critical to success. But delegation is often poorly done, failing to meet its key goals:

- Get some of the work done
- Get it done in a timely manner
- Get it done right

Secret # 1: Prepare! Delegation is a handoff of an expected outcome, not a task.

Delegation instructions are often about the facts of the task, the risks of error, the time deadline, and so forth. That is not a recipe for success. Just like a cookbook shows pictures of the completed dish, so must the delegator provide a picture of the expected outcome. Here are the three steps for success:

1. Picture an acceptable outcome in your mind.
 - a. Write that picture, in words or diagrams or both.
 - b. If there's a fence around the playing field, picture it also.
 - c. Include the time deadline.
2. Hand off the picture to the person you count on to do the work.
 - a. Ask them to describe the picture, fence, and time back to you.
 - b. Ask questions to help them (not you) become clear.

- c. Spell out when you'll be available to help.
3. Send them out with a smile and words like, "I've seen how well you work through tough problems. I'm counting on you. "

You're handing over a precious picture, not another annoying task.

Secret # 2: Nike is wrong. Don't "Just Do It."

The hardest thing about delegating is letting the other person do the job. Has a scenario like this ever happened to you?

You've delegated well: great outcome definition and project markers. Then you start to follow up. You find yourself in the middle of what IDEO General Manager Tom Kelley calls The Doorbell Effect: the experience when you've rung a doorbell and nothing happens and you're left wondering whether to wait, knock, ring again (does the bell work?), or leave?

This is the most dangerous step in delegating. It's the one that torpedoes successful delegation with frightening efficiency. You hear the Nike slogan in the back of your head, urging you on: *Just Do It*.

Well, *Just Don't Do It*. Don't give in to your urge to step in and do it yourself. Leave the job with the person you gave it to. Even if you could do it better, that would be bad follow-up. If you take it back, the damage will amaze you.

Here's the damage to you (the executive):

- Wastes time.
- Erases your people's desire to support you and your goals.
- Feeds your anxiety, so you don't listen or think well.
- Diverts you from business issues that matter.

And here's the damage to your people and the organization:

- Kills interest in taking a risk with a fresh solution.
- Breeds "do what the boss wants" thinking.
- Produces half-baked answers.
- Drives good employees into the arms of other firms.

"Just doing it" is the worst thing a leader can do. Instead, do your job as leader. Help your people succeed.

Unless your people are telling you that you are a master delegator, and they say it with shining eyes, you have an opportunity to make your life simpler and better. Yes, decide to learn to become a master delegator, and give it the same effort that you give to customers and financials. The payoff: better results, less worry. Guaranteed.

Call me.

For more information, visit www.grewco.com.

Jim Grew is an expert in CEO-level strategy and executive leadership whose clients refer to him as the Business Defogger and Accelerator. Jim helps leaders swiftly discover the hidden opportunities within their businesses and exploit them for dramatic results. Nearly three decades of success as a COO and CEO coupled with his experience running nine thriving businesses provide the foundation for his consulting work as president of the Grew Company. He presents regularly to industry groups, mentors business leaders, and shares insights on his blog, BizBursts.com: <http://bizbursts.com/>. He holds BA and MBA degrees from Stanford University.

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