

Delegate But Don't Abdicate

Let's assume that you want to delegate a task that's been sitting on your desk since forever. You know what needs to get done and have (finally) found (and trained) the right person to do it. Let's call this person Anjali.

You sit down with Anjali to plan the process. The two of you review everything from deliverables to time frame. You work together to set goals and feel like you're on the same page and ready to get moving. It would great if, at that point, you could return to your desk and just focus on what you need to be doing while relying on Anjali to do her work.

But it doesn't quite work that way. For Anjali to succeed, she'll need several other things from you in the days and weeks ahead.

One is to empower the trainee

If you want Anjali to step squarely into your shoes, even for an isolated role, she must be empowered with authority. This may include a change of title, a memo to staff, or an announcement at a team meeting.

Whichever you choose, you need to let people know that you have asked Anjali to perform an important task and would like everyone's support and cooperation as needed. Your backing provides instant credibility and will allow Anjali to do her job with confidence. In addition, you'll need to give her access to required resources and information.

Two is to monitor her progress

As things move forward, make sure to check in regularly. The best way to do this is by building meetings into the process from the outset. For example, decide from the beginning to meet every Monday at 10 a.m. to see how things are going. This will give you the information you need while maintaining an expected schedule. When you meet, it's not to look over her shoulder or because you see a problem. You're just executing on how the plan was set up, which will create a more natural feel.

Such an approach helps both parties. It's helpful to you because you need to know what's going on. For her part, Anjali wants to be able to share her feedback as well. She also wants to know that her leader cares and didn't just dump things on her and walk away. Rather, she'll feel that you really care and are willing to support her along the way.

Three is to offer help as needed

No matter how capable and competent Anjali becomes, there are going to be times when she will need your help. As leaders, we need to be willing to assist when needed to keep things moving in the right direction. Not to take over, of course. Not to helicopter in and reassume control. Leaders do this often, and it is a huge mistake. Resist the temptation to jump in and take over because you will lose Anjali's trust quickly. And no one else is going to want to assume projects for you because you're undermining the very relationships that you're looking to create.

However, if you come in with an attitude of assistance (saying things like, "How can I help you? It seems like you're struggling over here."), then Anjali will know that she can allow herself to be vulnerable and turn to you for guidance and support, as well as accept it from you when offered.

Four is to correct or redirect as needed

Though we want to avoid becoming the meddling boss, there are times when you may need to do more than offer a few pointers. If you see that things are starting to veer off the rails, you'll need to figure out how to correct or redirect the process to put it back on track.

In that case you would say, "You know, Anjali, I love the effort you're putting in. I really appreciate what you've accomplished so far. But there are some things that need to be fixed here, and if we don't fix them now, they're only going to get worse over time." Then go ahead and do what you can to redirect her.

And if, for whatever the reason, you are not able to do so, then you may need to pull the project back and try again with someone else.

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