



Trust and Delegation

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

When Gordon Bethune became CEO of Continental Airlines in 1994, the company had gone through their second bankruptcy. The workers had been so abused by managers with so many rules, that they showed no initiative. Using good leadership skills, Gordon showed more trust over the next few years and started to delegate more. At one point, he had all the policy manuals taken out to the parking lot and burned publicly.

Rather than relying on controlling rules, he established objectives and trusted the employees to do the right thing. The stock price went from \$2 to over \$50, and by the time Gordon left in 2004, Fortune Magazine ranked Continental as the Most Admired Global Airline. By delegating more and trusting the employees, he turned around the company in just 10 years. After Gordon left, things fell apart again for Continental, and they were merged with United Airlines in 2012. The lesson here is that performance can be turned around by great leadership, but that does not guarantee a rosy future if a weak leader follows.

The trick with delegation is to let go of the ropes in a way that sets up employees for success. Of course, there is always a risk that a delegated task will not be done to the satisfaction of the manager, but the upside in terms of allowing employees to use their creativity and energy to complete tasks dwarfs the risk that something bad will happen. I am sure there were times when Gordon Bethune saw something done differently than he would have done it, and yet the end result was one of the more amazing corporate reversals in history.

Trust and delegation go hand in hand, because when you delegate something to another person you are demonstrating trust that the individual will do what is right. The best way to build more trust in a relationship is to find ways to extend more trust to others. Leaders who have a hard time delegating often use the excuse that they just want to be sure things are done the right way. Unfortunately the signal being sent to the workers is that they are not trusted to do the right thing, so the culture becomes one of

apathy. By taking the risk of delegating more tasks, leaders can foster an environment of higher trust.

Exercise for you: Today, keep track of the number of tasks that you do yourself and see what percentage might be delegated to other people if you truly trusted them to do the job right. You may be surprised at the amount of time you can gain by this practice and also the amount of employee engagement you can generate.

Here are six tips to implement more delegation in your sphere of influence.

Announce intention – Talk about the issue of delegation and let people know you would like to practice more if it. Ask that they suggest areas where they might enjoy doing a task currently done by you.

Take the risk – You will find that by letting go of the control, your performance almost always improves, sometimes dramatically.

Keep communication channels open – Avoid micromanaging delegated tasks, because that constitutes false delegation. Rather, stay interested and accessible. Keep track of the little opportunities to encourage and praise progress along the way.

Provide exposure – Let the people at higher levels see the great work being done by your subordinates. Promote their good progress. The senior executives will also view you in a more positive light for making the effort, which benefits your career.

Be flexible when things go wrong – You will never achieve 100% success with delegation, but 90% success and 10% opportunities to learn is an excellent ratio for progress in any organization.

Use your newly-found time well – An additional side benefit of delegating more is that you have the opportunity to do more strategic work yourself. You get to become more valuable to your organization when you are not tied up in details and are able to think at a higher level.

It is easy to make excuses for not delegating work to other individuals. Most of the excuses do not stand up in the light of analysis. They reveal a mindset of low trust that employees pick up on quickly. Those leaders smart enough to let go find the employees willing and able to do the job. Sure there is some risk involved, but the upside is so huge it is worth the risk.

The preceding was derived from an episode in “Building Trust,” a 30 part video series by Bob Whipple “The Trust Ambassador.” To view three short (3 minutes each) examples at no cost go to <http://www.avanoo.com/first3/517>

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