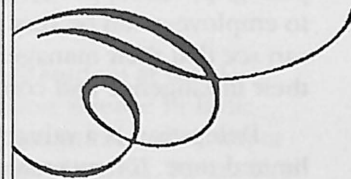# DELEGATION 101:

THE BASICS FOR LIBRARY MANAGERS

by Amanda Piegza

*D*elegation seems to be an uncomfortable subject for many managers, including those in the library world. First-time managing librarians may especially fear delegating duties, as some of them have never had subordinates in previous positions. Also, many seasoned managers have had unsuccessful attempts at delegation in the past, either in the library field or elsewhere. But these fearful attitudes should not keep a manager from learning about effective delegation and practicing them in his or her library setting.

Former editor of *Management Today* and management consultant Robert Heller (1998) says that managers' biggest fears about delegating are lacking trust in their employees' abilities to do delegated tasks adequately, the loss of control over every detail, and feeling insecure about giving directions. Stueart and Moran (1998), authors of *Library and Information Center Management*, state "some managers feel that they are not doing their jobs unless they make all of the decisions, even the smaller ones that subordinates could easily make" (p. 111).

As one can see, there are many negative attitudes that managers have about delegation. This is not due to the fact that delegation is not a good managerial method but that it is often carried out ineffectively. Professionals from different fields say there are several key factors that make delegation a beneficial tool. In fact, setting up effective delegation procedures, especially early in a management position, is one of the key components to becoming a successful manager.

For managers to come up with an effective form of delegation, they must be familiar with the common pitfalls. Many times managers state they are too busy to explain delegated projects and leave it up to their employees to figure out what needs to be done. When employees do tasks with little or no direction, the tasks may be done incorrectly. Some managers then get upset that projects were not done accurately because they had expected their employees to intrinsically know how the task should have been executed. The employees in turn can harbor resentment toward their

manager for having this unrealistic mindset. President of a major management consulting firm Chris Roebuck (1998) lists some other common delegation mistakes such as not giving the task to the best suited employee, micromanaging the delegated tasks and therefore not having enough time to do one's own work, and discouraging employees by never assigning new tasks.

So what is "good" delegation? Evans and Ward (2003) state there are four steps to effective delegation: thinking ahead, briefing, informing, and following through. Most of the other professionals who have written on the topic of delegation have suggested similar processes for effective delegation. Donna M. Genett (2004), psychologist and organization development consultant, lays out her "Six Steps of Effective Delegation" (p. 92). She says a manager must prepare what to delegate beforehand, define the task for the employee, outline a time frame for the project, decide what level of supervision is needed, decide when to meet with the employee to "review progress," and finally, have a "debriefing session" after the project is completed (p. 92-93). In his book *How to Delegate*, Heller breaks the delegation process down into different stages such as what tasks to delegate, deciding what employee to delegate a project to, training and defining tasks, and monitoring and providing support to the employee. It is important to note that these procedures are for higher-level delegation projects. For example, not much explanation and supervision is needed when delegating faxing duties. Even within major projects, different levels of managerial involvement are needed, and different levels of involvement should be used for various subordinates as their skills and expertise differ.

The benefits of delegation are well worth the time it takes to set up procedures for it. Selinger (2005) explains "being able to assign work is an important way to leverage your own effectiveness" (p. 62). A manager who delegates effectively will have more time to perform management-level tasks, the employees can expand their abilities and experience, and it will help the manager and the employees work together as a team. Business consultant Ken Blanchard, co-author of

The One Minute Manger, states that a manager should be the "coach" whose main goal is to get his or her "team" to "perform at the highest possible level" ("Relax your grip," 2006, p. 71). Delegating appropriate tasks to employees can be very motivating since subordinates can see that their manager realizes and appreciates their intelligence and commitment to the organization.

Delegation is a valuable tool for managers with limited time. If new managers do not set up delegation procedures early, they can fall into a cycle where they may not ever find adequate time to delegate effectively, which can hurt job productivity.
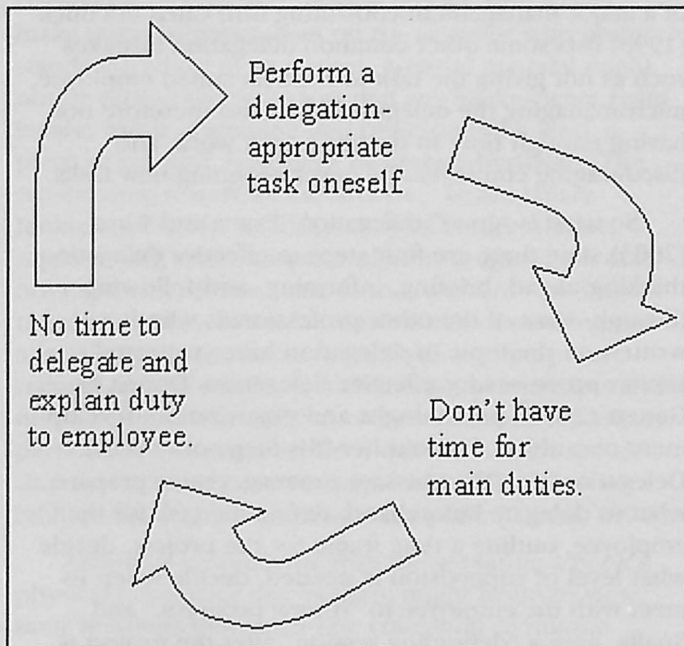

Figure 1 - Ineffective Management Cycle

The figure above shows the trap that new managers can fall into if they do not learn how to effectively delegate early in their management positions. As one can see, this is a "vicious cycle" that feeds on itself if managers do not take action to avoid it early. In the long run, this will limit the time they have to complete the duties that only the manager can do. For example, a manager's supervisor may delegate responsibilities to him or her, or subordinates may engage in reverse-delegation where they need their manager to perform a duty that subordinates are not authorized to do. If a manager falls into the trap above, he or she will not have adequate time to do these tasks.

Below are some tips on successful delegation.

1. **Know the legal and/or professional capabilities of what you can delegate.** Do not delegate a professional librarian duty, such as collection development, to a paraprofessional who is unfamiliar with the concept of intellectual freedom.

2. **While you do not need to know the exact amount of time a duty will take to complete, you need a realistic deadline for your subordinates.** Do not give an employee a day to do a task that would take a week to complete. Not only is this an impossible task, it will probably cause your subordinates to harbor negative feelings toward you.

3. **Effective communication is essential.** You do not need to hold your employee's hand through a simple photocopying project, but good communication with your employees for all delegated tasks is important. With more complicated or first-time tasks a thorough explanation can make the difference between a successfully delegated project and one that is unsuccessful.

4. **Think in the long-term.** One way managers fall into the "Ineffective Management Cycle" is to think only about the present. A manager may feel that it would take less time to explain a duty to an employee than to just do it oneself. Even if this is the case, in the long run, the manager may waste time by not delegating this duty. If it takes 15 minutes to delegate a task but only 10 minutes to do it, and it is a one-time thing, do it yourself. However, if it needs to be done bi-weekly, that is over 17 hours a year you can free up from your schedule if you sacrifice 15 minutes today.

5. **Trust your employees' abilities.** It is a mistake to assume most employees are unable to take on new tasks. The majority of subordinates are intelligent and trustworthy enough to do most assignments. If an employee truly is untrustworthy, you have bigger problems than delegating a task.

6. **Don't micromanage.** Letting go of some minute details is essential in delegation. Just remember that you can proof a subordinate's work before turning it in to your supervisor, and you can talk with the subordinate if the work did not turn out as needed. However, keep in mind that it will rarely turn out *exactly* like you would have done it since no two people are *exactly* the same. That is OKAY.

Delegation is an important managerial tool that can benefit managers, employees, and the work place. Library management positions and duties differ, so it is not possible to suggest one "right" way to delegate projects. However, after a manager gets to know the work environment, new delegation procedures should be instituted. Such delegation will help start the manager and the department down the right path to a successful collaboration.

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