



Levels of authority: the art of effective delegation

As a project manager, does it sometimes seem that your projects have got out of hand? That there's so much you need to do that you're almost suffocating under the weight of it all? Do you have a nagging thought that there *must* be a better way to get things done? How good are you at delegating? This article outlines the principles of effective delegation.

The price of deciding to do everything yourself because it's 'quicker than explaining what's needed to someone else' can be delays in the project, extra cost and huge stress – not just for you but for your project team. So learning to delegate well is *essential*, whether you're working with your own team, across departments, or – if you're in an INGO – across countries and continents.

Effective delegation

Effective delegation is not simply about handing over a task. It's about understanding the *competence* and *commitment* of the person you want to delegate to – how experienced are they at doing this work? Have they ever done anything like this before? How signed up are they to the project? Only then do you know what *responsibility* you can give that person to do the task, *and* how much *authority* it's reasonable to let them assume.

So, what's the difference between responsibility and authority in this context?

- *Responsibility* is an individual's commitment to act on something that (s)he accepts or (s)he should deal with.
- *Authority* is the power to do something without first obtaining permission from another person.

Few project managers have a challenge with what responsibility they are handing over with a task. *"It's up to you, Ahmed, to ensure the data collection is completed by the end of the month."* *"Maggie, it's your job to come up with the implementation plan."*

Where project managers are more likely to fall down is in being clear about what authority they are handing over with the responsibility. Can Ahmed pull in other members of staff to help him complete the data collection without asking for permission? Can he move the deadline? Can Maggie employ an external consultant to work with her on the implementation plan without asking for permission? Will the plan be hers' sign off? In other words, what *level of authority* do Ahmed and Maggie have?

Levels of authority

There are six levels of authority you can delegate as a project managers ranging from *Level 1* – find out about this but do nothing without my say so, to *Level 6* – do whatever you need to do to get this done. We go through each level in more detail below.

Level	What it means	Example
Level 1: look into the problem; report all; I'll decide what to do.	As project manager you are holding onto the authority and giving responsibility for closed, tightly-defined tasks. You need to agree the timescale as part of the delegation.	"Katy, go and talk to the donor within the next week and find out exactly what happened when they called to make a donation. Just listen, don't make excuses for us. Come back and tell me what she says straight away. Once I know what happened, I'll decide how we should respond the same day you report back."
Level 2: look into the problem; let me know alternative actions including pros and cons of each; recommend one for my approval.	As project manager you are handing over some responsibility not only to explore the issue, but to define what options exist to address it. However, you hold on to the responsibility to decide which option to take. You need to agree the timescale as part of the delegation.	"Max, find out why the food supplies were six weeks late arriving at the refugee camp. By the end of the month, let me see a list of options for how we might avoid this happening again. Tell me which one you're recommending and I will decide whether or not we should implement it. I'll need a day to think it through."
Level 3: look into the problem; let me know what you want to do; don't take action until I approve.	As project manager you no longer need to know all the different options available, but you're keeping hold of the final decision on whether to take action. You need to agree the timescale as part of the delegation.	"Isabella, take the next three weeks to look at why attendance at the day centre has dropped so dramatically. At the end of that time, I need you to tell me what you plan to do to get numbers up again. Don't take any action before I decide whether or not you should go ahead. I'll get back to you with a decision within 48 hours."
Level 4: look into the problem; let me know what you intend to do; do it unless I say "No."	As project manager you are saying "Keep me informed and I will flag any issues with you." It's getting trickier at this point to tread the fine line between giving the person room to manoeuvre, and ensuring as best you can that they don't fail. It's possible to avoid the latter if you agree key points in the timescale when you need updates on progress and where you might say "No."	"Josef, I'm giving you six months to sort out the problems with the intranet. I'd like you to come back in a month and tell me what you're planning to do and what budget you'll need. Then I'd like monthly progress reports and an update of spend against budget. I'll get back to you within 24 hours of any report if I'm concerned about anything. If the budget starts going astray by £500 or more, I need you to tell me straight away."

<p>Level 5: take action; let me know what you did.</p>	<p>As project manager you are delegating responsibility for the task and giving the person the authority to take any action they deem necessary to complete it. Your interest in finding out how they went about doing the task after the event is partly because you are still ultimately accountable for the success or failure of the task or project. And partly so you can help them reflect on their action and take learning for the future.</p>	<p>“Monika, take the lead on the enquiry into the abuse allegation. You’ll be representing us in court. Make an appointment to see me when the hearing is finished so we can review what you did.”</p>
<p>Level 6: take action; no further contact with me is required</p>	<p>Before you use <i>Level 6</i> just do a quick check to make sure you are not simply abdicating responsibility. At this level, you are handing over responsibility and authority for the whole project. Be very sure it is appropriate.</p>	<p>“Alex, the departmental merger is all yours. Good luck.”</p>

How to decide

So how do you decide which level of authority is the most appropriate to delegate for the person and the situation? There are three key factors to consider:

- **Competence and commitment:** does the person you are delegating to have the right skills and experience to be able to carry out the task or project wholly without your input or will they need help? The key to delegation is assessing this correctly. If you delegate at too high a level, you will set people up to fail; if you delegate at too low a level, you will make too little use of the talents and abilities of your people, and they will feel unduly restricted
- **Timeframe:** is there time available for learning or experimentation in carrying out the task or project? If time is short, even the most experienced and committed person will need a clearly defined framework to work to
- **Risk:** what is at stake if this project goes wrong? Some projects are high risk because failure will be very public (a mix-up over the arrangements for the 50th anniversary celebrations; a poor quality annual report) or because there are high stakes (a major new contract with a new customer; a funding opportunity you can’t afford to lose). It’s advisable specify success criteria in these cases – further if the team or individual is less experienced

Further help

Effective delegation is just one aspect of successful project management. Book onto =mc's intensive 3-day programme **Project Management**. It will provide you with a range of systematic tools to ensure that your projects meet the needs and outcomes they were set up to address.

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