

Part One

INTRODUCING DELEGATION

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THE DEFINITION OF DELEGATION

Most people walk around with knowledge of many words and probably wouldn't feel a need to look them up in a dictionary. I only looked up the verb 'delegate' myself for the sake of clarity at the beginning of a workshop I was about to deliver. I almost didn't recognize the word from its definition. In fact, I realized that the word's meaning had changed and that it was time to revisit the notion of delegation with a fresh pair of eyes, to revisit this often ignored – though always expected – skill of a manager.

The strict definition as written in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is:

To delegate *vb* the act of transferring or handing over work to another person usually more junior than oneself.

This was probably highly appropriate and factually correct during the fifties, sixties and maybe even seventies, when a secretary was often the equivalent of an 'office wife', the 'boss'

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was more-often called by title and surname and subordinates by their first or surname only. Management status was cherished and the notion of rank still fresh from the post-war era. The eighties perpetuated the notion of delegation as a one-way process, the sometimes-aggressive dumping of often less attractive tasks to a junior.

The characteristic excess and status-led attitude of the yuppie years gave way to a much more sensitive and somewhat politically-correct era which led to a far greater consideration of managerial relationships and the dynamics of emotional intelligence being applied in the workplace.

In addition, during this time, essentially from the nineties onwards, we have seen an explosion in technological advancement. Though the eighties was the beginning of the mobile phone era, the nineties saw the rise of email and electronic communication, and thereafter and through the noughties, we have seen the rise of social networking sites and more latterly the (largely worldwide) addition of smartphones.

Smartphones have to a great extent imprisoned us in a world of infomania, whereby the phone has become a constant companion, less a phone for many and more a device that makes unqualified demands on our time. As a consequence it is a huge distraction, often dragging highly-paid and highly-qualified professionals and business people into a time-wasting mire of deletion and (often over-zealous, ill-considered) speedy responses. Of course, emails, social media and the Internet are hugely valuable too, but their impact on delegation, in the strict sense of the word, has been dramatic.

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Think back to the archetypal image of a secretary who, for the sake of stereotypical accuracy, we will say was female. Her role was to take down dictation, type up letters and memos (remember them?), often she would draft replies to letters and memos herself, in her boss's style for *him* to edit and/or sign. For him, his communication schedule was controlled and limited: the post came in and was prioritized for his attention by his secretary. Communiqués requiring urgent attention were pushed under his nose, with or without suggested replies. He studied them, decided how to act, dictated or directed a responsive action to his secretary (reply, meeting, delegation to another or ignore) and got on with other things until she had something to report. Note then that he was not constantly checking for replies or in fact able to directly communicate quickly or instigate prolonged, often instant, discussion on a matter.

Clearly this scenario rarely exists today, but its historic place in our, actually quite recent view, of delegation remains true. Fast forward even to the nineties and I would argue that secretaries were far more likely to be in charge of the email inbox, responding on behalf of their managers, deleting, prioritizing, replying and taking action where appropriate, precisely as a result of the legacy of a life and role prior to the emergence of electronic communication.

My point here is not to make or even attempt to make a social study on the impact that the digital age has had on our lives and economy. Far from it: merely, I seek to illustrate that roles have changed in recent times as a result of these advances and with it our certainty and our relationship with skills such as delegation.

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If I may stray briefly from the management skill that is delegation, let us expand the notion that the social digital age has blurred the lines for many of us and that adaptation is vital to maintain quality leadership in our businesses and successful businesses as a result. Our lives are now indelibly published online, see the enlightening short talk by Juan Enriquez.¹ They can be researched by employers assessing potential and in-post employees and vice versa. Managers can no longer maintain a professional distance from their colleagues, team and managers, unless they entirely shun the social media world and, even then, they have limited control over what others may post about them, pictures and all. This changes the game. Managerial leadership now has to be managed in the context of an extended professional landscape. Everyone can have a deeper knowledge of anyone else's personal or past professional life, all at the push of a button. Suddenly we are all 'famous'. If, once again, we take the strict definition of the word,² then without qualification of the elements 'known' and 'many' we all have the potential to fall into the category of famous, and so we have to add reputation management more vigorously to our skill portfolio.

These days many of us grapple, at all ages, to understand what this alone means to our online persona: How we appear to everyone in our world; friends, family, our children and their

¹*Ted Talk: Your online life, permanent as a tattoo*, http://www.ted.com/talks/juan_enriquez_how_to_think_about_digital_tattoos, accessed 10th October 2014.

²*Oxford English Dictionary* definition of 'fame': 'mass noun; the state of being known by many people'.

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grandchildren, their teachers and lecturers, our employers, colleagues, suppliers and clients is increasingly something to think about. And we have a very clear and present need to address what this means for each of us. As an entrepreneurial middle-aged female with pre-teen children, I have both a business and personal need to understand these technological impacts, but I am not a 'techy': I find it more a necessary evil than a welcome invasion. That said, I embrace the benefits into my life without thinking about them – instant messaging, online diary and document access, indulgent voyeurism, music and movies on the move and so on. My chances of being 'papped' in a compromising Friday night position by a 'friend' who then plasters the pics all over the latest social media platform are mercifully limited (though not entirely over!); however, management of these risks for our children are highly prevalent and relevant. The benefits and damage – even to the point of suicide – are extreme and real and in large part we all understand the need to learn to deal with it.

More importantly, though, with regards to this book, we need to understand what, sometimes subtle, impacts this new, modern, technology-driven world has on delegation – how we delegate, how often, what form it takes and how effective it is. These impacts are not just the preserve of technology, though its existence influences the other key factors of gender and (slowly) increasing equality between the sexes and the influence of culture on this.

If we look again at the post-war period, we will see the stereotype of a white-collar male worker making his way up the corporate ladder and the point when he would be awarded the 'office wife'.

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This would be a benefit both for him and for his real-life wife, as the new employee would be able to do more personal tasks for their boss – such as picking up the dry-cleaning, making hair and dental appointments – that normally fell to the boss's housewife. This was the social, status and professional reward for achieving a certain level of management.

These days, where the equivalent of the 'office wife' exists in a less frequent/more likely to be shared scenario and with the advent of greater equality, greater expectations of women's performance and career ambitions in the workplace, the delegation relationship is often (but not yet always) very different.

Culturally, we live in a more equal society where the media has helped to shape our views of those in positions of so-called power. Celebrities, royals and politicians are regularly featured and exposed in publications and online; in fact as social media enables us to instantly enter almost anyone's life, a degree of deference has almost certainly been lost at all levels of society.

And so delegation, in part, becomes a choice not just for the superior, to draw on the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition and to return us to the original point, but also for the junior. It is less an expected part of one's lot and more an acceptable part of one's role. That it is acceptable also means it can be deemed unacceptable and this, to my mind, defines the art of delegation or, more precisely, the verb 'to delegate', as a skill that involves reducing one's own workload by handing it over to another party (or software) application who (that) agrees to execute an agreed list of actions to an agreed standard within an agreed time.

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Later, we will apply this thinking to delegation in scenarios other than the workplace and examine the multi-directional and multi-media capability of delegation in the home and in a political landscape as well as looking more deeply at the upwards and sideways manifestations of delegation.

The Gift of Time is accompanied by an online programme that offers practical help, activities and accountability for action.³

³For more information see: <http://thegiftoftime.yourgoalstoday.com/>.

