

# THE ART OF DELEGATING

**David Parmenter** explores the benefits of good delegation for managers, employees and businesses as a whole



I was once a contractor for a CEO, let's call him Chris, who had to be the worst CEO I have ever worked for. Chris was a trained lawyer and, stereotypically, one who thought their way of writing was the best. That is why there are so many rewrites when you get two lawyers engaged in a divorce agreement, and why the bills are so exorbitant.

Chris would receive a draft report written by an employee who, at the very least, had three years of tertiary experience and perhaps even a doctorate. No matter how knowledgeable they were, or how well the report was written, Chris would revise it, often into the early hours of the morning. As a consequence, staff started to ease up on their standards as they knew the rewrite was a foregone conclusion. Chris was always taking care of the monkey.

In 1999, Oncken and Wass wrote one of the most read *Harvard Business Review* papers titled *Management Time: Who's got the Monkey?* In the paper they had a lovely story about a manager (Paul) who, while walking down the corridor, was met by Sam, his subordinate. "Paul, we have a problem with the report," explains Sam, who details the issues. And because Paul is very busy, he says: "Let me have a look at it, send me an email with your work to date and I will get back to you."

This process continues through the week with Paul's other subordinates until they all start popping around Paul's door on Friday asking, "How is it going? I can't make much progress until you have made a decision."

On a beautiful sunny Saturday morning, Paul goes into the office to look at all the monkeys he has willingly collected during the week. Meanwhile, on a

picturesque laid out and manicured golf course a four is about to tee-off. The four are Paul's subordinates, without a care in the world, as they have offloaded their monkeys to their workaholic boss.

### EXPERTLY ORGANISED

Just recently my wife was diagnosed with an inoperable but curable brain tumour. During this time, I noticed how exceptionally well the local city hospital was run. We are talking about an organisation that is perpetually underfunded, as public funding cannot keep pace with the rising costs of new treatments and the health demands of a growing population. A common problem worldwide.

In this difficult situation I observed some marvellous lessons in the art of delegation. The brilliant brain surgeon, who took a biopsy of the tumour, was a master at explaining to us what was to happen, the risks and the next steps. When he was on the ward speaking to patients, three young doctors were shadowing him. In the theatre they would have assisted in the easier tasks, leaving the surgeon to demonstrate how to take a sample of the cancer without damaging any other part of the brain.

Everywhere I looked there was evidence that the hospital was operating at a very high level of competence. It was clear that there had been a substantial investment into recruiting the right people all the time, a commitment to training them and a high level of trust required so that they could perform the important delegated tasks.

Delegating is crucial as without its proper use the manager will have less time available in the long run, have demotivated staff as they don't get the chance to advance and learn, and the organisation has increased operational risk as there is too much reliance on a single person. As Peter Drucker, the father of modern management, reminds us: "The more the individual in an organisation grows as a person, the more the organisation can accomplish."

### THE THREE Ts OF DELEGATION

These three different observations led me to believe that time management, training and trust are at the core of delegation. The American Nurses Association described delegation as the "transfer of responsibility for the performance of an activity from one person to another with the former retaining accountability of the outcome".

**Time management** is so important as the manager needs time to recruit properly, time to assess the task for delegation, time to set up the right person for the task, and time to monitor and give feedback to subordinates when they are undertaking a delegated task.

The problem with delegation is that there is a classic Catch-22 operating within it. You cannot

**As Peter Drucker reminds us, "The more the individual in an organisation grows as a person, the more the organisation can accomplish"**

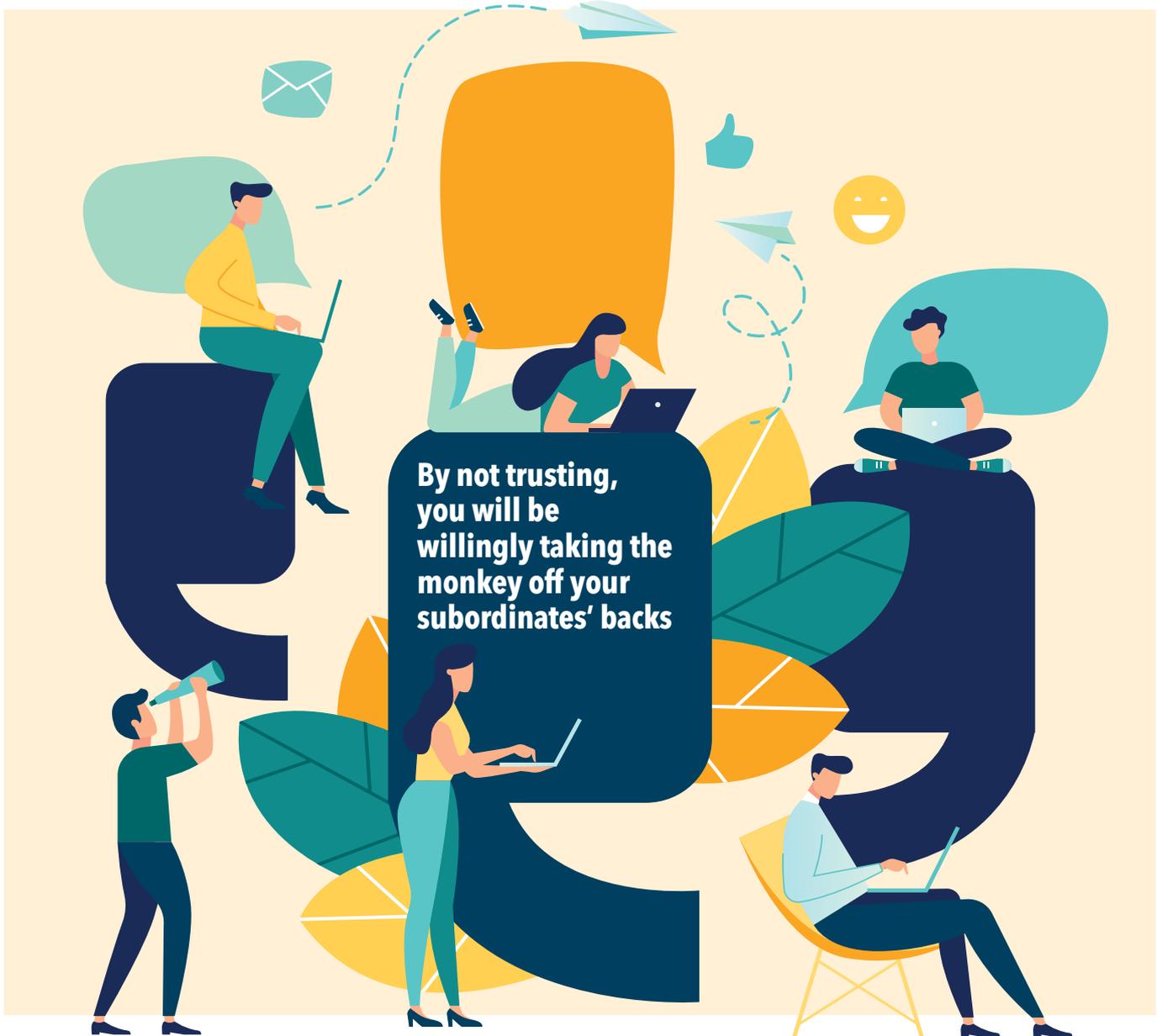
delegate properly or successfully if you are time poor and yet time poor managers need the benefits of delegation the most. I would go on to say that managers of large teams need to be on top of time management or they should have their responsibility downsized.

**Training of staff** is required so there is a common understanding of how the team writes reports, delivers presentations, researches projects and undertakes quality assurance exercises to ensure that the final product is grammatically up to standard and the logic of the report is evident.

Some of the best training a subordinate can get is when the manager invests time in one-to-one training and allows staff to shadow them in areas they need exposure to, just like the medical model. In this area we will also need to spend time thinking about the rotation of staff so that they become more valuable to the organisation as they become cross trained.

The importance of training and delegation was shown to me recently with the birth of my nephew's daughter. After the birth, the mother had a massive haemorrhage. The midwife calmly explained: "I am about to press this red button, please do not be alarmed, 12 medics will be here within 20 seconds and take over". They came and all knew their role. There was no discussing who should do what today; that had been worked out in relentless practice sessions. Just like a Formula One team, they were practiced perfect. They went to their area and began their task, relaying information on. Without this level of training, the mother's outcome would have been entirely different. This commitment to training is why hospitals function at a level that other organisations can only dream about.

**Trusting staff to deliver a product that is fit for purpose.** In the first observation we had a lawyer who thought his way was the only right way. He would trust only himself and his work. The key to trust is to acknowledge that there is more than one way for the task to be done. Unlike a maths exercise at school, there are many ways to write a report that will guide the decision-makers effectively. In addition, even if the task is not



performed to the manager’s standards, fit for purpose is good enough and is a small price to pay for a great learning opportunity.

Training helps trust to grow. If the reports that arrive on Chris’s desk are match ready, error free and written in an agreed style, Chris will only need to add a brief paragraph stating his support for the conclusions and recommendations, leaving the subordinate’s name on the front page of the report. It would also help Chris if he could say to the report writer: “Since it is your report, I want you to present it to the board,” knowing that they will deliver well as they have attended the same presentation training course.

In order to trust staff, you need to know them inside-out, having invested time in one-to-one sessions so that you know about their current workload, their abilities and their preparedness to take the required action.

Lord Horatio Nelson, in his pursuit of the French Mediterranean fleet, used to get the captains together every lunchtime to talk about a possible new scenario. “What if we meet the French at dusk and they are tied up in shallow water, do we attack or wait for daylight?” he would have asked. The captains would discuss and agree on a way forward so, over time, they became a band of brothers, clones of Nelson, so much so that during the battle of the Nile, Nelson did not give one command when they saw the French tied up in shallow water with their washing hanging over their gun ports.

By not trusting, you will be willingly taking the monkey off your subordinates’ backs. In fact, you are encouraging your subordinates to pass the responsibility back to you. Oncken and Wass found that there was a transfer of control, as the subordinates were managing Paul by asking “How are you getting on with my report, Paul?” In other words, by stepping in

you are allowing your subordinates to step out.

In the end some managers will never be able to trust their team adequately. I suspect they are also time poor like Chris. These managers need to be moved to more specialist roles or out of the organisation.

You have only really mastered these three Ts - time management, training and trusting your staff - when your team can carry on without you, like Nelson's captains did during the Battle of Trafalgar.

### THE FIVE RULES FOR DELEGATION

In the Nursing Council of New Zealand's guidelines on delegation there are five rules, which I would like to share with you:

# 1

#### Right activity

Here, the manager needs to ensure that the activity needs to be done now by the team. Before this decision the manager should ask, "could this activity be abandoned?" and "should this activity be carried out by another department?" Having determined that it is an appropriate activity the manager is then required to divide the activity into manageable tasks.

# 2

#### Right circumstances

This means the manager ensures that the timing is right. There is no point writing a report that management is not ready to decide on. Nor is it appropriate to delegate a task that the manager themselves has not done or had exposure to. In addition, the resources required for the task should be at hand.

# 3

#### Right person

The manager selects the right person, ensuring that they have the ability to do the task and that they are prepared to accept their output. You can delegate tasks that will challenge staff, but the task should be within their capability. Drucker warned us never to give a new recruit a new project, one which was new to the organisation's staff and thus creating concern and instability. He referred to these jobs as "widow makers", jobs where an external appointment did not have a chance to succeed as it was high risk and required a well-liked and trusted inhouse project leader.

# 4

#### Right communication

Here, the manager invests time giving a clear description of the task, in an unhurried manner. Quite

the reverse of the time poor manager's delegation that is a brief incoherent instruction. The right communication involves a clear understanding of the objectives and expected outcomes of the task, the expected depth of research and liaison with stakeholders, the start and expected end date, a guideline of the significance of the activity to the team and organisation, and finally the budget constraint. At this point we need to explain what degree of autonomy the subordinate has with decision-making. Leadership development architect Susan Scott's decision tree model can be used to make it clear what are the:

- **Leaf Decisions:** decisions they can make without having to account for them.
- **Branch Decisions:** decisions they can make but need to comment on in the next one-to-one session with you.
- **Trunk Decisions:** decisions they need to discuss with you before they take action.
- **Root Decisions:** decisions that you need to be informed about early on so you are part of the decision process, eg, decisions that, if poorly made and implemented, could cause major harm to the organisation.

# 5

#### Right monitoring and feedback

Here, the manager will, during walkabouts, pop into the subordinate's work area and see how things are progressing, having time to talk about problems and making sure the monkey stays with the subordinate. Jack Welch, Peter Drucker and Jim Collins have all talked about the importance of recognition and celebration. Welch went on to say: "Work is too much a part of life not to recognise moments of achievement." It is worth remembering recognitions are more powerful if they are given publicly, whereas reprimands should always be done privately.

#### NEXT STEPS

Print off the five decision rules and stick them on the wall.

If time management is an issue, listen to a recorded webinar I delivered for the Business & Management Faculty on the topic. For without mastery of time management you will always be on the back foot.

Recognise the team members who have performed well in the past fortnight.

List at least five tasks you do that you can now delegate.

Collect all your monkeys and hand them back to their rightful owners. ●



**David Parmenter** is an expert in KPIs, quarterly rolling forecasting and planning. He is an international presenter of workshops and the author of four books

