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A NEWSLETTER FROM HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL PUBLISHING

ARTICLE REPRINT NO. U0709B

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by Lauren Keller Johnson

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# Are You Delegating So It Sticks?

by Lauren Keller Johnson

You know that a key part of any executive's or manager's job is helping subordinates develop professionally—including honing their problem-solving and decision-making powers. Thus, you're well aware of the dangers that come with taking on all your direct reports' problems. But what about when you're under immense time pressure and someone tries to hand you one or more *monkeys*—the memorable term for subordinates' problems that William Oncken Jr. and Donald L. Wass introduced in their classic 1974 *Harvard Business Review* article, "Management Time: Who's Got the Monkey?" In high-pressure circumstances, accepting a monkey can seem a lot more efficient than taking time to coach an employee to resolve the problem himself.

Returning monkeys to their rightful owners seems even more difficult today than it was in 1974. For one thing, managers have come under increasing pressure to generate measurable results faster than ever. And as Stephen R. Covey, cofounder and vice chairman of FranklinCovey (Salt Lake City), maintains, some managers fear being viewed during tough economic times as unimportant or unnecessary if they delegate more to employees. They

assume that there's only so much power and authority to go around and jealously guard their own. New managers—promoted for their stellar performance as individual contributors—can find delegating especially challenging because they've scored major successes by handling problems themselves.

But just as delegating has grown more difficult, it's also become more crucial for companies seeking to compete. In Covey's words, "20 or 30 years ago, only 30% of the value added to goods and services came from knowledge work. Now it's 80%. So if companies hope to survive, they must empower people to think for themselves and draw on their experience and wisdom."

Fortunately, experts and executives across a range of industries have continued developing techniques aimed at making delegation easier—and more effective at keeping the monkeys with their rightful owners.

## 1. MAKE YOURSELF LET GO

For many executives, the path to more effective delegation begins with reexamining two basic assumptions about their roles. First, many managers "continue to assume that it's faster and more efficient to take on employees' problems than to teach them to handle their own," says Patti Hathaway, author and business adviser with the company The Change Agent, based in Westerville, Ohio. Second, "they believe they know more than their direct reports do."

These assumptions, Hathaway says, only increase managers' desire to control problem solving and decision making rather than empower their employees. To counteract this, she encourages her clients to think as leaders, not as managers. Managers, she advises, "manage details (for example, by solving direct reports' problems). Leaders manage people by encouraging a sense of ownership and accountability among subordinates." By envisioning themselves as leaders, managers become more comfortable and



open to delegating tasks initially and to passing monkeys back to their owners.

Kyle Beaty, former first vice president of Washington Mutual National Operations, agrees. “If I’m micro-managing my people,” he frequently reminds himself, “that...sends the message that I don’t need them.”

### 2. ASK, DON'T TELL

Letting go of problems is only as effective as the manner in which you delegate them. To that end, skilled delegators know to ask questions rather than dictate orders.

“Asking ‘What do you think should be done?’ teaches people to come up with proposed solutions the next time they bring you a problem,” says Joyce Gioia, president of the Greensboro, N.C.-based consulting firm The Herman Group. Additional open-ended questions—such as “What do you think led to this problem?” “What are things we might consider if we implement the solution you’re proposing?” or “How did we handle this situation with customer B?”—can reveal the degree to which subordinates have thought through their respective problems.

As Edward Massood, president and COO of MGM Transport in High Point, N.C., says, “When I ask my people how they plan to deal with a problem, we can then explore the ramifications of each idea and make sure we’ve covered every important consideration.” Massood has benefited immensely from using this approach. “Before I started asking questions, people used to be lined up outside my door, and I was staying at the office until 7 or 8 at night to clean up problems. Now they come to me less frequently. And when they do, we resolve problems a lot more quickly because they’ve thought through several possible plans.”

Florence Stone, editor of *MWorld*, the quarterly management journal of the American Management Association (New York City) and author of *The Essential New Manager's Kit* (Dearborn Trade Publishing, 2003), recommends using silences in addition to questions. Instead of responding immediately to what you’re hearing, she advises, wait a moment to give the person ample time to generate and evaluate ideas for handling the problem in question.

### 3. MATCH TASKS TO PEOPLE

Managers can avoid taking on subordinates’ monkeys by matching delegated tasks and problems to individuals based on their assessment of each direct report’s capabilities and development needs.

“Delegate in ways that enable people to stretch,” advises Bette Price, a management consultant as well as CEO and president of The Price Group (Dallas), “and treat mistakes as growth opportunities. Explain your assessment of each member’s capabilities so they understand why you’re handing certain tasks back to them.”

Covey emphasizes the power of delegating based on subordinates’ deepest passions. “Find out what each of your direct reports does best and loves doing most,” he recommends, “then marry their unique talents and passion to the job’s needs. With passion, people don’t need supervision: they’ll generate creative solutions to problems on their own.”

### 4. CULTIVATE INDEPENDENT THINKING

The more an employee thinks independently and feels a sense of ownership in her job, the fewer monkeys she tends to bring to her supervisor.

At Planterra, a Michigan-based interior landscape company, Director of Business Development Shane Pliska uses a “monkey rating” system adapted from the approach Oncken and Wass described in their article. “We ask employees to rate their problems on a number scale,” Pliska says. “One means the manager solves the problem, two means the manager tells you how to solve it and you follow up, three means you propose a solution and ask for your manager’s approval, and four means you take action and tell your manager about it afterward.” When people come to their supervisor’s office, Pliska explains, the manager asks, “What number is it?” To cultivate a sense of ownership, Planterra managers encourage employees to make as many “four” decisions as possible.

Linking direct reports with the resources they need will also reduce the number of monkey-toting reports at your door.

Kathy Wilson, director of product marketing and strategy at Silicon Valley-based printing-equipment manufacturer EFI, uses a streamlined version of this system. “At EFI, we encourage creative approaches to problems. I want my team to be resourceful, to develop their individual problem-solving capabilities,” she says. “When we discuss problems, I want them to present the issue to me with insightful observations and their plan to solve the problem—[then together] we’ll look at the alternatives and pick the best solution.”

To that end, MGM Transport’s Massood specifies three

categories of expectations for employees: “What their actual job responsibilities are, what knowledge I expect them to have, and how much empowerment they have.” This is an important point, experts note. You can’t expect someone to solve a problem if she’s unclear on whether she has the authority to do so.

Interpersonal workplace problems—for example, a person complains about his boss to another supervisor—present special challenges for managers. To avoid taking on that particular breed of monkey, Kellie Wardman O’Reilly, a former director at the Greater Manchester (N.H.) Family YMCA, holds people accountable for bringing complaints back to the original source. “I ask them when they intend to confront the other person,” she says, “and I follow up to make sure they’ve done it.”

### 5. LINK PEOPLE WITH RESOURCES

Linking direct reports with the resources they need to solve a problem will also aid in reducing the number of monkey-toting reports at your door. Think of resources in broad terms—as people, tools, information, and developmental opportunities that can help employees resolve issues on their own. Serving as a resource connector can be as simple as saying, “You need to talk to Joe in marketing.” Informational tools can also be valuable. For example, The Change Agent’s Hathaway advises clients to provide

an intranet phone directory organized by department and function, not by name, for new employees who don’t know anyone yet but who need to know where to bring specific types of problems.

Some executives also establish mentoring systems. Bo Calbert, president of the Southwest division of Phoenix-based McCarthy Builders, authorized his company’s training group to develop a mentoring program that matches senior leaders with new managers who need to master delegation skills. “People have raved about the new insights they’ve gotten from the program,” he says.

Michelle Van Dyke, president and CEO of Ohio-based Fifth Third Bank of Western Michigan, leverages the power of information. “I use e-mails and meetings to share information with employees about our industry, our bank’s strategic focus, and our financial performance. They need to know the same things I know if they’re going to make smart decisions and solve their own problems.” ♦

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