

# How to Delegate

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"I would delegate if I weren't so busy." All too often this is the excuse people use instead of sharing with other members the responsibilities of building our organization or working on issues. As a result, they become overwhelmed by the amount of work they are doing, and frustrated by the lack of help from other group members. In fact, leaders who tend to do everything in a group are often faced with the puzzling results of a shrinking and inactive membership, despite their hard efforts. Overworked leaders may recognize the need to delegate their responsibilities, but find it very difficult to do after the group has gotten used to bad habits.

Learning to delegate is a skill which is critically important to developing and maintaining strong, membership-run organizations. Like many other organizing skills, delegating is a process which involves setting goals, careful planning, and follow-up. To do it well, we need to change the way we think about asking other people to participate in our organizations. Delegating means sharing the work load, but it also means sharing the fun and satisfaction that come from accomplishing something.

Successful delegating is a two-way process: one person asks another person to do something and the second person decides whether to accept the responsibility. These roles involve skills that every member of a group should understand and practice. It is a good idea to have a group discussion about the importance of delegating and techniques for doing it well, especially if you belong to a group which has developed some bad habits about not sharing responsibilities.

Your discussion can begin by asking the members to think of a time when they were part of a group in which responsibilities were not shared well. Their examples may come from personal experiences as leaders or as group members. Go around the room and ask each person to give their example and one consequence of poor delegating. These examples will generate a list which may include some of these points:

## Consequences of poor delegating:

- information and decision-making not shared by the group
- leaders became tired out
- when the leader left the group no one had the experience to carry on
- group morale was low and people became frustrated and felt powerless
- skills and knowledge concentrated in a few people
- new members did not find any ways to contribute to the work of the group

Ask people to look at the list they have just created and think of reasons why it is important for the strength of the group to delegate jobs well and share responsibilities. Again, go around the room and have each person offer one reason. The list might look something like this:

## Why delegate?

- to use skills and resources already within the group
- to keep from burning out a few leaders
- to develop new leaders and build new skills within the group
- to get things done
- to prevent the group from getting too dependent on one or two leaders
- to become more powerful as a group

- to allow everyone to feel a part of the effort and the success
- group members feel more committed if they have a role and feel needed

It should be clear from these two lists that delegating well is central to good organizing and developing new leadership and a strong membership base. Your group's discussion can now focus on some specific skills and techniques of successful delegation.

It can be helpful to think of delegating as a process with three separate phases or steps. Divide into three smaller groups and give each group a large sheet of newsprint with one of the following headings written at the top: "planning," "assigning responsibilities," and "following up." Ask the small groups to think about one of these phases of delegating and come up with some important things to do and remember for successful delegation. The small groups can then share their ideas with the whole group. Some of the important points from each phase are discussed below, but your group will probably come up with many others.

### Planning:

It is generally true that people will be more committed to working on projects which they had some input in developing. Therefore, it is important to bring people in at the first stages of an idea, rather than at the moment that something needs to be done. If a group has discussed and agreed upon its goals, the members will be much more willing to carry out the necessary work. In addition, group decision-making can help avoid a situation where a few people set goals or make promises which the group cannot fulfill.

Once the group's goals have been established, a smaller group of people, for instance an event planning committee, can make a list of the tasks or projects which need to be done. This is the time to clearly define what is involved for each job and to develop a timeline for carrying out each one. The plans should be as detailed as they need to be, but remember to leave plenty of room for the creativity and input of the members who will actually do the work.

Another important part of the planning involves careful consideration of the skills and resources available within your group as well as the interests and motivations of individual group members. As a group leader, this involves getting to know the members of your group and understanding why they are involved and what they have to offer. As a group member, it is equally important to think about the talents you have to share, some areas you want to improve in, and the time and resources you are willing to commit.

A lot of this type of information is shared informally within any group through daily conversations and friendships. It can be useful, however, for each member to make a list for themselves of their specific skills and interests, including things they enjoy and areas where they want more experience. The information from these notes can be shared as a group, and many hidden talents may be revealed, perhaps including poets, sign makers, great cooks, or costume makers.

### Assigning responsibilities

This is the stage we usually associate with delegating. Although it can happen in many ways, the simplest situation involves one person (usually a leader or a member of the planning committee) asking another person (or several others) to do a task or project. If the planning stage has been done well, there should be few problems with finding people willing to take on necessary responsibilities. However, there are a few points to keep in mind.

- **Decide what setting to use.** Some jobs can be delegated during your group's regular meeting, and others are better discussed personally with a specific member. In general, it is better to ask members to do more complicated or demanding projects in person, when there is plenty of time to explain what is involved. Group meetings are

- great times to get lots of volunteers for more basic tasks like volunteering at a bake sale or posting flyers.
- **Be enthusiastic.** Standing up in a meeting and saying, "We have this nasty job that I don't want to do, and for once someone else is going to have to help," will not get the desired results. Remember that there may be people in the group who enjoy and have time for tasks other people consider grunt work. For instance, some people like doing jobs that have a beginning and an end, like stuffing envelopes or calling people before meetings.
  - **Delegate important tasks, as well as less important ones.** People are likely to be willing to do some of the "grunt work" if they also have the chance to contribute to the decision-making and more important work of the group. Giving people increasing responsibilities and challenges will allow them to grow and develop confidence in their abilities. When there are routine tasks to be done, remember to emphasize how the smallest details contribute to the strength of your organization.
  - **Try to make every task a learning experience.** You might ask, for instance, "Who would like to learn how to make to flyers for the next fundraiser?" This approach will help involve new people and will build talents and knowledge within the group. It will also avoid the trap where a member who has a specific skill gets stuck doing the same job all the time.
  - **Let the person you ask say no, but don't say it for them.** Instead of asking, "I know you are really busy and you probably can't do this..." Simply explain the reasons why the job is important and ask for the person's help.
  - **Be clear about your expectations and get a commitment.** Explain clearly to the volunteer what needs to happen and by when. It may be necessary to negotiate with him or her about the timeline or about specific parts of the project. However, be sure to come to an agreement that both of you commit to live up to.
  - **Remind the group of its goals.** If it is hard to find volunteers to do the work, it may be necessary to revisit the group's goals and see if people are still committed to doing the work it will take to accomplish them.

### Following up

The delegator's role does not end when the jobs are all assigned. Giving careful attention to the final follow-up stage is essential to make sure that the delegated work is done well and on time. Proper follow up can achieve much more than simply what needs to be done; it can help each member who volunteered feel good about his or her contribution and be likely to do more in the future. Some of the things to keep in mind during this final stage are:

- **Provide training.** Some people may need training to do the tasks they have offered to do. This could involve accompanying them to a government office and showing them how to get access to the information they need. It could also mean pairing a volunteer with another member who has experience in a certain area.
- **Be accessible.** Be sure volunteers know how to reach you if they have questions or concerns. They should be told that they are responsible for informing you if problems arise. The night before a major event is not the best time to check in with a volunteer the first time, you may want to call then as well. Each person will have a different style of working and some may need more supervision than others.
- **Be encouraging.** Help motivate others and express your confidence in their abilities to do the assigned tasks. Encourage creativity and be tolerant of risk-taking and mistakes. Emphasize the importance of learning new skills, especially if the volunteer feels uncomfortable because other group members have more experience in doing a particular job.

- **Hold members accountable.** Remind people that they have made a commitment to the group. If they are unable to fulfill their obligation, ask them to suggest a solution which will get the job done. If a task does not get done, find out why as soon as possible. It may be helpful to ask people to explain to the group why they were unable or unwilling to do what they said.
- **Congratulate!** Be sure to thank people for jobs well done. Depending on the situation, your group might give awards or some public recognition, or it might simply send thank-you notes to volunteers. Regardless of what method you choose, the important thing is to make people feel that they have contributed to building the group and achieving its goals.