

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

By Tom Henschel



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Leading Through Delegation ▶ 06/05/14

Good reasons for not delegating

Simon needed to delegate. His boss had made it one of his development goals. The feedback I'd gathered about him mentioned it repeatedly.

He didn't resist the feedback. "I wish I could delegate," he said wearily. "But I just can't."

"Because ... ?" I prompted.

"My folks aren't ready. I inherited them and I'm working to grow them as fast as I can, but meanwhile, the work has to get done. So I do it. And I don't delegate. I know I should."

"Do you have a plan for making it better?" I asked.

He looked as if he'd gotten a little electric jolt. "Plan? No! That's why everyone's so annoyed with me. I don't have a plan for how to keep the plane up in the air and, at the same time, take off the wings and rebuild them."

I laughed. "That's a pretty dire metaphor! If that's how I thought about delegating, I probably wouldn't do it either!"

"Why?" he asked, a little puzzled. "Do you have a different metaphor?"

"I sure do!" I said. "It's a story, actually. Well, no, it's a metaphor, too, I guess."

He was intrigued. We settled in and I began.

Picture yourself standing on a country road. You are surrounded by open space.

You have bare essentials: comfortable clothes, shoes, water, food, whatever basics you need. But that's all you have. Nothing else. No pencil or knife or tools, let alone a car or a phone.



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Your task is to travel on the road ahead of you. Along the road are many gates. Once you pass through a gate, resources will become available to you. Use the resources you find to build some sort of wagon sturdy enough to carry two adults for one mile on that road.

As you set off, you learn that this wagon-building challenge has existed for generations. Many people you know have been playing it for years without your knowledge. And they continue to play. Many already know how to build wagons and have become expert. Others are in various stages of learning. Many of them will help you. Some won't.

Now stop. Now imagine yourself having played that challenge for ten years. Having learned through experience, you've become an expert yourself.

You begin the challenge once more. As you do, a person approaches who is clearly a first-timer. She is like you were ten years ago.

You don't stop your challenge to do hers, but you're happy to help if she wants it. As you talk, you discern she isn't a complete beginner. She knows many fundamentals. So you can direct her to other gates, often five or six gates away, to execute tasks on her own.

Periodically she returns to show you her progress. Pretty soon, she completes her first challenge by delivering a wagon of her own.

What it means to "build a wagon"

I stopped the story and said to Simon, "I find that metaphor helpful because you can picture yourself anywhere along the delegation skill path. You can be the person who does the delegating or the person who gets delegated to."

"Yeah, but there's one problem with that story," he said.

"What's that?" I asked.

"That woman is building her own wagon; she's not helping me with mine. I'm not delegating to her. She's doing her own thing."

"Yes," I agreed, "unless you think of 'building a wagon' as much larger than just building a wagon.



Think of 'building a wagon' as a metaphor for any business endeavor. It could be a department, a project, or a company. 'Building a wagon' just means 'work.' In that metaphor, she could be part of your team."

"Oh," he said. I could tell he was re-sizing "building a wagon" to something much bigger than he'd been picturing.

He looked up at the ceiling, then said, "But is that delegation? Sending people off to build their own wagons?"

"No one's ever asked me that before!" I said with delight. After considering his question, I said, "Delegation might be sending people off to build their own wagons. But that's not all it is. I think delegation has three steps."

"Really? There are three steps? Great!" he said and readied his pen with a click.

Delegation's Three Steps

"Step one: assess the work. What's the goal? What will the major milestones be? Be specific. Not every 'wagon' is the same. As the leader, you get to decide if a rolling platform will be good enough or if you need an elaborate chariot."

"Sure," he said almost to himself, making the smallest of notes. "I don't have a problem assessing the work. I know which gates have the resources I need. And I know the milestones. I just don't always think my people can do the work."

"Well, that's step two," I said. "Assess the person."

He made another quick note.

I went on. "Some folks are like that woman in the story. You can send her through five or six gates all on her own.

"But some people are closer to the blank slate you were ten years back when you first found out there was a challenge. Those people need to be given nearby gates and need to come back to you more often."



He nodded his head. "Jonathan on my team is a first-time-around kind of guy. And it's annoying. I need him to be able to go further before he comes back to me."

"Do you mean he knows enough to go further but doesn't trust himself?" I asked.

"Yes, I think so. I think he can go further."

"Then it's time for step three," I suggested. "Agree on the gates. That's step three. Get agreement about deliverables."

He made another quick note.

That crucial third step

I said, "Tell him, 'Don't come back to me until you've gone through these four gates and done your best. Ask others for help if you want, but stretch yourself. Don't come back to me until you're done.' Then set a date for him to be finished."

"So the gates are stages of the work, right?" he asked.

"Yes," I agreed. "Or milestones. Or deliverables. It's whatever chunk of work is appropriate for that person at that stage of his development."

He nodded slowly, smiling. "Yes, that might work with Jonathan." Then the smile faded as he said, "But that would never work with Lina. She's the opposite of Jonathan. She thinks she knows everything and keeps going through gates she shouldn't."

"Are you concerned about *how* she's doing her work?"

"Oh, no. I'm not micromanaging her. She's just not savvy about when she needs to slow down and get buy-in."

"So she has poor judgment and causes damage sometimes," I said. "It's not that she's going further than you're comfortable having her go?"

He smiled as if we were suddenly dueling with our wits. "You mean, am I being a control freak?"



I laughed. "No, I didn't mean that. Besides, one man's control freak is another person's hands-off manager. If someone wants to review every comma in a 100-page report, I say go ahead! As long as it doesn't become a bottleneck and back up the work."

"Which is what people say is happening with me," said Simon.

"That is what they say, isn't it?" I said with a smile.

He spun his pad around so I could see it. Just a few words descended the page on three different lines:

Assess the work

Assess the person

Agree on 'gates'

You delegating = you elevated

"It can't be as easy as this," he said, "or I'd be doing it already."

"Well, everyone has their own reason for not delegating. But usually it's more about the leader than about the team. For example, you keep saying your team isn't ready, but the longer you wait to delegate to them, the longer they aren't ready. What else is stopping you?"

Without a beat, he said, "It takes so much time!"

"Yes, it sure does," I agreed. "That's why people say, 'it's faster ...'"

"...to just do it myself!" he finished.

"Which is a fine short-term solution." I concurred. "But it doesn't help build your team's strength. And it doesn't allow you to do the level of work you're supposed to be doing. If you don't let them build their own wagons, you'll never become senior. And they'll never become expert."

He shook his head, combining a look of "I know you're right" with "I'd rather take my licks and not do it."



“Look, Simon, delegation isn’t any one specific skill. It’s a broad spectrum of behaviors. With some people you’ll be hands off and trust them to do large chunks of work. With others you’ll put up lots of gates and check-ins. Not all delegation is equal.”

“That sounds like ‘[Situational Leadership](#).’ I took a course on that a couple years ago,” he said.

“Yes, that’s a perfect connection,” I agreed. “I love that [model](#) because it demands that you delegate differently to different people.”

“Thinking of it that way makes it a little easier to start doing it. But it’s still going to take a lot of time,” he said.

“Yes,” I said sympathetically. “You need to make time to delegate if you’re going to achieve *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.”

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