Delegation, authority, and responsibility: A reconfiguration of an old paradigm

Management is often defined in simple terms as getting things accomplished through people. At the core of management practice is a process that involves assigning tasks to others (delegation), granting these individuals the right to accomplish them (authority), and holding them accountable for accomplishing the tasks (responsibility). The foundation of the delegation process rests on two widely held assumptions that have been raised to the level of tenets, maxims, or even “principles” of management. These assumptions are that the delegation of a task does not release the delegator from the responsibility for task completion (“the absoluteness of responsibility”) and the idea that authority should equal responsibility (“the parity of responsibility and authority”). Though several landmark research studies have recognized the delegation process as complex and multifaceted, they have examined the delegation process as a single construct and have failed to address the just mentioned two foundation dimensions of the delegation process (Lena 1986, Yukl and Fu 1999). The purpose of this paper is to examine the inherent inconsistency and incompatibility of the two above-mentioned tenets of management, to propose a reconfiguration of the delegation process more consistent with reality, and to discuss how managers can enhance not only their performance but also the organization’s performance through an alternative model of management incorporating personal power.

The Absoluteness of Responsibility

The idea of “the absoluteness of responsibility” holds that a leader can delegate tasks (and the authority and responsibility to complete them) to a follower but the leader never relinquishes his or her responsibility for task completion. For example, the head of an
organization hires a vice-president of marketing and delegates to the vice-president the responsibility for accomplishing the organization’s marketing goals – giving the vice-president authority over a budget and other resources for the marketing tasks. Next, the vice-president delegates to the head of the advertising department the responsibility for accomplishing the organization’s advertising – giving the department head authority over a budget and other resources for the advertising tasks. Finally, the advertising campaign for a specific product is delegated to a specialist in the department and the specialist to whom the task was given is also responsible for successful completion of the task.

According to the principle of “the absoluteness of responsibility,” the specialist would be held responsible for the success or failure of the advertising campaign; the department head would be held responsible for the success or failure of the advertising campaign; and the vice-president would be held responsible for the success or failure of the advertising campaign. Depending on the magnitude of the success or failure of the advertising campaign, the head of the organization would be held responsible by the organization’s Board and/or its stakeholders. What we see in the scenario above is that at each level of the organization, part of the budget and other resources (authority) is surrendered down the chain of command but at each level responsibility is retained. This is the “absoluteness of responsibility” in action.

The Parity of Authority and Responsibility

If our managers in the marketing scenario just discussed are constantly surrendering authority over resources to subordinates while retaining responsibility for task completion, this situation does not demonstrate the “parity of authority and responsibility” as regularly passed on in business schools and management seminars. What we saw above was that authority was a
limited resource within the organization while responsibility was an unlimited resource. In other words, when one delegates or gives away authority to the recipient, the authority is gone from the delegator but the responsibility is not. The result is an increase in total responsibility in the organization but a constant amount of authority. When the organization had all authority and responsibility for a task’s accomplishment in the hands of the organization head (entrepreneur) there was a parity of authority and responsibility. The delegation of authority and responsibility by the organization head to a subordinate caused a “gap” to exist for the organization head because the head lost some authority but retained responsibility. The next level manager received authority and responsibility, but not of equal measures – resulting in a gap for the next level manager because of not receiving enough authority and/or resources to accomplish the task(s) for which the manager was being held responsible (Bushardt, Duhon, and Fowler 1991).

**Reality and Scholarship**

Managers in both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations have usually learned by experience that it is a rare situation in which someone is given authority equal to the responsibility for a task. Managers and mid-level supervisory employees regularly decry that they are being held responsible for tasks for which they have insufficient authority (Walker 2008). Given this inherent contradiction (i.e., there is no parity of authority and responsibility) it is no wonder that managers and employees often feel they are being unjustly treated and become frustrated in their jobs (Baker and Newport 2003).

The reality for practicing managers is not that authority equals responsibility but rather that authority is less than responsibility. In addition, the gap between authority and responsibility increases as one views higher levels of the organizational hierarchy. Extrapolating
we see that at the top of the organization the manager has all the responsibility but may have relinquished all the authority.

Management scholars have repeatedly called for closing the gap between authority and responsibility by having managers relinquish more of their authority through empowerment of subordinates (Amar, Hentrich, and Hlupic 2009, Flemming 2009, Hughes 2002, Wilson 2009) but, to the contrary, we believe that due to the limited nature of or authority and the expandable nature of responsibility, delegating authority to subordinates actually widens the gap between authority and responsibility for higher level managers. When managers delegate a task while retaining responsibility, they are often reluctant to let go of their authority because their superior refused to grant them the sufficient authority in the first place. Other common reasons for not delegating are lack of confidence in the subordinates, fear of failure by the manager, and lack of perceived goal congruence (Yukl and Fu 1999).

An Alternative Model

Though authority tends to be less than responsibility, individual subordinates have tended to embrace this gap in different ways. Many, having been taught the “principle” that authority equals responsibility, have become frustrated, disillusioned, and resentful of the delegation process. When held accountable for accomplishment of tasks for which they do not have authority or resources to accomplish, subordinates often feel that higher management has not done its job or met their expectations and these feelings urge them to avoid future opportunities to participate in the delegation process – often to the detriment of organizational effectiveness. The response by management scholars has been a consistent call for empowerment of these employees (Amar, Hentrich, and Hlupic 2009, Flemming 2009, Hughes 2002, Wilson 2009).
Given the limited amount of authority within organization and the ever-expanding responsibility, it is doubtful if empowerment of employees by higher-level managers will ever be a practical solution to these individuals’ frustrations. Successful managers, on the other hand, when given authority that is less than the responsibility, tend to be successful taking their limited formal authority and using an additional variable, personal power, to meet their responsibilities as expressed in the following equation dramatically changing the maxim of the parity of authority and responsibility:

   Authority + Personal Power = Responsibility

Successful managers realize they will not be provided sufficient authority by their superiors to meet their responsibilities; thus they rely on personal power – as opposed to formal authority invested from the organization (Bushardt, Fowler, and Fuselier 1988). Successful managers may seek empowerment from their higher-level managers, but they do not see themselves as victims waiting to be rescued by someone from above. Rather, they but engage in self-empowerment through creating personal power to meet their responsibilities and tend to be more successful at accomplishing tasks (Lee 2001). Their success at self-empowerment tends to increase the perception among their superiors that they are competent, and in turn they enjoy even more responsibility commensurate with their self-empowerment skills. While a manager may employ Machiavellian tactics to enhance his/her power, this tends to be damaging to organization’s long-term goals and interests. In addition, it tends to be self-destructive to the manager’s career as well. There are many means by which the practicing manager can enhance his personal power through self-empowerment that are not at the expense of others or detrimental to the organization’s long-term interest. The sources of personal power that successful managers develop in self-empowerment as a means of executing tasks and meeting their responsibilities

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include social networking, practicing reciprocity theory, increasing interpersonal skills, and developing personal characteristics as discussed below.

Social Networking

Social networking is a process of developing relationships both inside and outside of the organization. The network should not be a demographic reflection of the manager but should include people from many levels and backgrounds within the organization as well as outside of it. In accomplishing a task, it is essential that one be able to utilize other people’s talents whether they are within one’s chain of command or not. Astute managers realize that one does not develop a social network to accomplish a task, but one has a social network that can assist in task accomplishment. If one waits until a social network is needed, it is likely to be too little too late. Successful recipients of task delegation are often those individuals who made the time to build a social network long before it was needed.

Reciprocity Theory

Reciprocity theory from social psychology suggests that a good turn should be rewarded with a good turn (Glantz and Pearce 1989). In short, if an employee goes out of his required organizational role to assist a fellow employee in task accomplishment, he or she is likely to receive the same treatment in return. Astute managers are keen to assist others in their task accomplishment with the realization that in time they too will find themselves in a situation in which they will have responsibilities and insufficient formal authority to meet the task for which they will be held accountable.

Interpersonal Skills

Leadership skills, motivation skills, and communications skills are strong components of developing personal power for use in meeting organizational responsibilities. The ability to
communicate persuasively beyond the confines of formal communication channels without threats of coercion and organizational sanctions is a skill that delineates successful managers in the delegation process. Effective communication, coupled with empathetic listening, is a useful source of personal power that builds a strong asset pool to be used to meet responsibilities. By enhancing interpersonal skills, managers engage in self-empowerment as opposed to relying on others to empower them.

**Personal Characteristics**

The way a manager dresses, his or her self-confidence, and the possession of technical skills and knowledge are personal characteristics that may be used towards meeting responsibilities. Through self-examination and efforts at self-improvement managers can seize the moment and empower themselves.

Employee efforts at self-empowerment through social networking, practicing reciprocity, increasing interpersonal skills, and developing personal characteristics tend to enable one to meet the responsibilities and task assignments with limited formal authority. By requiring managers to rely on self-empowerment a number of positive organizational outcomes occur.

**Benefits of Personal Power**

The reality of authority being less than responsibility should come as no surprise to practicing managers. Managers should not expect, nor will they likely be vested with, sufficient authority to meet their responsibilities so they must rely on their individual skills to develop personal power. While the reliance on self-empowerment may pose some threat to organizational stability, it also affords a number of positive outcomes. Because authority is less than responsibility, an organization that encourages the use of personal power facilitates
organizational integration, identifies the promotable, provides employee development, and offers job enrichment to the employees.

**Facilitating Organizational Integration**

Because managers regularly rely on others outside of their chain of command to accomplish their unit’s goals, successful managers are likely to be helpful and supportive of other units (social networking using reciprocity theory). For example, when a manager encounters a technical problem in his production area and realizes that the technical expertise to resolve this issue resides with an employee in another department outside of his authority, he will often go to the supervisor in charge of that unit and ask to borrow the employee to help him solve the issue. Of course the employee’s supervisor is often willing to make the sacrifice and give up his employee temporarily because this creates a debt that can later be called in to solve a problem for which he is responsible. This constant give and take within the organization occurs outside the formal authority relationships and is based on reciprocity and self-empowerment. Organizational integration is advanced as the dependency on others fosters support of each other’s goals and lends support to the old adage that no man is an island.

**Identifying the Promotable**

The ability to develop personal power is essential to meeting responsibilities. The presence of the gap between authority and responsibility allows upper management to ascertain who is more likely to succeed at higher levels (where the gap is even larger) because they can observe those most adapt at creating personal power to meet their responsibilities. The higher one is in the hierarchy the more one must rely on personal power to meet responsibilities. Yukl and Fu (1999) suggest that managers delegate different responsibilities to different subordinates and are more likely to delegate to subordinates that they perceive as competent. Those who are
most promotable are those who complete their tasks and meet the responsibilities assigned to them. These individuals are likely to be the ones who are most adept at self-empowerment.

**Providing Employee Development**

Studies by Leana (1986) and Yukl and Fu (1999) suggest the primary reason managers delegate to their subordinates is employee development. Because the gap in authority and responsibility increases as one ascends the organizational hierarchy, junior managers have the opportunity to perfect their personal power skills at lower levels where the necessity of personal power is less. As individuals are promoted upward in the organization during their career, the demands to increase personal power to meet responsibility will increase.

**Offering Job Enrichment**

Some jobs are highly repetitive and mundane – providing little in the way of a stimulating challenge. Because the gap in authority and responsibility exists, these jobs need to be transformed into a challenge as the manager takes control of his or her life and pursues personal power as a means of meeting responsibilities. Because personal power is subtle and contains many facets, the challenge to master self-empowerment is intellectually challenging and demanding. Acceptance of the need for self-empowerment establishes the subordinate with an internal locus of control and helps to eradicate the sense of victimhood many feel from lack of formal authority.

**Conclusion**

Many managers are frustrated with the delegation process because they have been told repeatedly that authority should equal responsibility and it rarely ever does. Short on authority to meet their responsibilities, they are continually reminded of the absoluteness of responsibility.
Some managers have tended to deal with this dilemma by trying to avoid being held accountable and shifting responsibility to others – a demoralizing aspect within most organizations. Others have dealt with the frustration by avoiding responsibility, feeling angry, and or withdrawing. Still others have successfully developed personal power by engaging in self-empowerment to meet the challenges of responsibility. They have developed social networks, relied on reciprocity, and strengthened their interpersonal skills, and developed useful personal characteristics.

Those managers who attempt to avoid responsibility by passing the buck should be called to task because their behavior is detrimental to the organizational climate and organizational effectiveness. The managers who feel frustrated because they lack the authority to meet their responsibility need to have a better understanding of the delegation process. They need to have an understanding of the reconfigured paradigm of the delegation process where authority plus personal power equals responsibility. As long as managers hold to the unworkable theory that authority equals responsibility, they are likely to continue to be frustrated. These managers need to understand the expectations of personal power and the ultimate need for self-empowerment for goal achievement. Repeated calls by management scholars to empower subordinates, while apparently worthwhile and satisfying to subordinates, tend view subordinates as helpless victims dependant on a higher authority to become successful.

Communicating the expectations of self-empowerment through personal power will enhance organizational effectiveness by fostering greater organizational integration – something that is more critical today than ever before because of the increasing environmental uncertainty organizations are confronting in the complex global economy. As employees better understand the relationship between self-empowerment, authority, and responsibility, they will find their
jobs more interesting, more challenging and more rewarding. Furthermore, as more employees understand the new paradigm that requires self-empowerment and move to develop personal power, upper management will have a larger pool of talent to promote to higher levels, thereby enhancing organizational effectiveness.

References


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