

## **LETTING GO IS NEVER EASY**

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Letting go has never been easy. Whether giving the car keys to a teenage daughter or allowing someone else to do the service schedule, stepping back and being comfortable with someone else being responsible comes with a myriad of obstacles, even for those who know it's important to do it. So, what keeps people stuck?

Whether a business owner or manager, both offer one or more reasons why they don't delegate. Some of these frequently heard include – “it takes too much time to train someone”, “I can do it faster myself”, “I tried it and we lost an important customer”, and the ultimate show stopper, “no one can do it as well as me.”

So, what's the impact of not being able or willing to delegate? At the owner level, one falls into what's called the “entrepreneurial trap.” This trap is that at the company's outset, the owner assumes all risk, does most of the jobs, and makes most of the decisions. At first, this mentality and approach is to be expected and actually works. However, as the company grows, the entrepreneur begins to become overwhelmed with keeping up with their own tasks while trying to make needed decisions and give clear direction to an increasing number of employees. Staff are then kept from taking action or completing needed tasks. And, worst of all, people learn not to be responsible, not to step up and do what's needed. Ray Grimm of Chicago based, Air.Water.Energy. has experienced this phenomena multiple times. “As we grew, the office demands increased, I became more heavily involved, and sales plateaued. I needed someone to assume selected office management responsibilities as that was taking too much of my sales time. My bookkeeper had the potential to assume broader responsibility, yet it wasn't easy for me to let go of some office roles. I had to become more organized, stop keeping so much in my head, and write things down so that she didn't need me as much. Through both of our efforts, we grew into new roles, freeing me to close more sales. Since then we have exponentially grown.”

Beyond the owner sphere, at the managerial level, the patterns are similar - managers who work hard, yet not necessarily smart, do too much themselves, “always know best”, and have difficulty delegating—not just the tasks, but the authority and independence to carry them out. This frequently leads to staff who are not learning and developing, are hesitant to express their ideas, and continue to need their supervisor's permission or guidance. And, ultimately the manager stays “stuck” and unable to assume other more important tasks.

So what can owners and managers do? Being aware of the need to let go and delegate is only a first step. People need to adopt a different mental model that says “in order to grow, doing it all myself and working more hours isn’t sufficient.” Once there, owner/managers need to know how to enact this new view, so as not to become disappointed and eventually retake delegated tasks and rhetorically saying, “I told you so.” Ray Grimm learned and utilized some important steps – documenting processes and procedures, clearly articulating expectations, and not saying, “Here’s how I would do it.” While very helpful, there’s one more critical component – on-going performance feedback. Letting people know where they are specifically doing well as well as how they might improve, significantly lowers the chance of disappointment and then reassuming the role or taking back the tasks.

To start the process, Owners and managers can ask themselves three basic questions.

1. What can I only do? And then, keep doing it.
2. What can someone else do right now, or with a little training/coaching? And then identify appropriate people to do it and begin the delegation process. This might include doing some of the work together and until the individual can do it on their own.
3. What task might someone do eventually with a deeper level of training and coaching? And then identify individuals with the potential and initiate the longer term training and coaching process.

So clearly the message in answering the three questions and instituting the necessary training, coaching, and feedback mechanisms is that simply saying, “This is yours” and wishing people well is not sufficient. And the good news is, once owners and managers make this transition they find it very liberating. They can now attend to those matters that only they can do such as banking relationships, bonding, strategic planning, closing larger sales, and financial oversight.

While Ray Grimm and countless others find skilled people within the company, Clark Cook, operations manager of Salt Lake City based Atkinson Electronics adds another component, the hiring process, “We begin people development during the interview process. Once we find that potential service technicians have basic skills, we take the interview a step further. We ask them questions about how they have historically done being given very high expectations and how they would go about demonstrating service behavior as if they were the owner. Once hired, we initiate them into how building systems and controls operate, yet more importantly, we continue to immerse them in acting as if they were the owner again and again through training, coaching, and project debriefs.”

Letting go and allowing others to assume meaningful responsibility is more than nice to do—it’s a must do. Following the recipe of identifying what others can potentially do, giving them clear expectations, providing needed training and coaching, and offering on-going performance

feedback is key to long term business growth. And, just as importantly, you may be able to take a well-deserved, mostly worry free, and much needed, occasional vacation.