

Successful Delegation

Susan J. Ellis

One of the most important skills needed to be effective in working with volunteers (or, for that matter, in working with paid colleagues and even members of your family) is that of delegation. Here are some reminders of what it takes to share work successfully, adapted from a section on delegation in [*The \(Help!\) I-Don't-Have-Enough-Time Guide to Volunteer Management*](#) (now available in the [Amazon Kindle store](#)):

- Recruit the most appropriate person (or team) genuinely willing to handle the task. Don't fall into the trap of settling for the nearest available warm body.
- Discuss the work to be done in detail, negotiate *how* it will be done (as well as the end product), and then create a written assignment description.
- Define *your* role in relation to the delegated project, too.
- Tasks you assign to others should be concrete and manageable, with clearly-defined timeframes and deadlines. Define complex tasks in stages, so that people can feel a sense of achievement as each benchmark is reached.
- Tell the truth about the time required to do the job properly and your expectations for when it should be finished. Similarly, whenever possible, assign the whole task at once, rather than revealing something new each week.
- Give people titles to match the responsibility they will be handling, and then consistently refer to these titles yourself.
- Give the person/team information that sets the task into context. People work more intelligently when they understand how their activities mesh with the activities of others, or how a new task builds on a previous one and, in turn, brings the organization closer to its goals.
- Identify and provide access to resources and materials the person/group can use to get the job done.
- Never underestimate the importance of good instructions. A basic part of training, instructions are the key to starting a job. Do not assume that anyone, particularly a volunteer, is completely familiar with your office procedures, policies, legal regulations, or anything else affecting a task. Instructions can include samples of similar work; knowing how something was done in the past is a great beginning point for a new job.
- Discuss some alternate contingency plans, should an original tactic not be successful.

- Set limits: At what point must you be consulted or involved, approve expenditures, receive progress reports?
- Remove limits: Encourage people to exercise creativity and initiative in those areas where there are no hard and fast rules to be followed, or where you feel they have adequate expertise.
- Develop a reporting plan: How often and in what form (e-mail, phone, face-to-face in person or online with webcam) will you communicate with each other about progress? Negotiate the frequency of contact necessary to offer mutual feedback and support.
 - Do not ignore silence (and don't be silent yourself). Communication is the most important element in a successful collaboration. It allows both of you to feel that you are on track and, if a problem arises, it will not fester. Volunteers feel more appreciated when they know you are aware of their efforts.
- Once you've delegated, don't undercut the independence of the team member. For example, refer all questions about the delegated project to the person responsible.
- Make it a condition of starting a task that the volunteer commit to training his/her successor or replacement. Though this may not always work perfectly because of the frequent time lag between needing a volunteer and finding one, people should know they are expected to help assure a project's continuity. Therefore they might even return to your organization for a day or two to help train the new team member. Another strategy is to ask team members to keep a written record of their procedures that can be passed on to their successors. None of us wants to think our hard work will be lost indefinitely, so passing the torch is satisfying.
- When you begin a new delegation, set a time to meet or talk again fairly soon. This appointment provides an incentive to the team member to make some progress by then and gives you the opportunity to assure yourself that things are off to a good start.

By Susan J. Ellis, president of Energize, Inc. (www.energizeinc.com), an international training, consulting and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism. This was the Tip of the Month for May 2012.