

Don't Be Afraid to Delegate

Paul B. Brown

It's a tautology, of course. If you insist on doing everything yourself, your business will never grow beyond what you can personally handle.

People who run small businesses know this, but as Beth Schneider, president of Process Prodigy, which "helps business owners leverage the best business practices," points out on Entrepreneur.com there's "something in us that fights against asking for help." She added: "It's almost like there's some rite of passage in being able to do it all ourselves. But the reality is, you can't do it all and focus on your strengths without stretching yourself in too many directions."

And that means small-business owners need to delegate, if they wish to grow, a concept, she concedes, that can be difficult to accept.

"Delegation is about handing over authority, and for many small business owners, that's a scary concept because you don't know what will happen when you give up control," she writes.

WHY NOT? Michele Hanson-O'Reggio, writing on solo-e.com, a Web site for business owners with no employees, agrees that fear is a major reason that entrepreneurs do not delegate.

By delegating, business owners are taking a risk because they do not know if the person to whom they are delegating will be up to the task. But, she says, entrepreneurs need to get past their fears, because "risks are necessary for business growth."

What else keeps entrepreneurs from delegating? She lists these four other factors:

1. Worried the work will not be as good. They worry that the person they delegate to may get the job done but not as well as if they had done it themselves.
2. Clueless. "You may simply not be aware of the tasks that can be delegated because you have not invested time to examine your activities and learn about help that you can access."
3. Egomaniacal.
4. "Confusing action with productivity. You may feel that if you delegate, there will be nothing left for you to do. Nothing could be farther from the truth!"

HOW TO DELEGATE If you want to delegate, Jeffrey Moses, writing on the Web site of the National Federal of Independent Business, a small business advocacy organization, suggests starting by acknowledging you "are not the only person who can do things exactly right."

Then, since you are unlikely to turn into a hands-off manager overnight, "establish written descriptions of the tasks you are delegating, and be sure that your employees understand every detail," he says. "Descriptions of tasks should include: methods, goals, means of accomplishment (finances, employees, equipment, etc.), quality of work done, means to define that quality and timelines for completion of each stage of work."

And, for peace of mind, do not begin by delegating large or vital projects.

"Take things one step at a time by starting with smaller, less important tasks," he writes. "As your experience with delegating progresses, you'll feel more comfortable assigning larger projects, and you'll be better at the delegation process."

IF YOU DON'T The inability to delegate can literally lead to a life of regret, as an Inc. interview with Alfred Peet, founder of Peet's Coffee & Tea, makes clear.

"I always had good personnel. I paid more than the going rate," he told Jill Hecht Maxwell. "But I worked too hard, because I couldn't delegate. I wanted to oversee everything. I said, 'I know exactly where I want to go, but I can't explain every thought, every idea I have for the future of this company.' Many people left. I was burnt out, so I had to sell. Do you know what it's like when you've given so much, and there's nothing left?"

LAST CALL Here's something to ponder when you are trapped with a screaming infant on a plane that is taking you to a meeting with a big prospect:

According to a poll conducted by Maritz Research, nearly three of four airline travelers (73 percent) believe that there should be "family sections" on planes.

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