

The Delegation Dilemma: How Nonprofit Leaders Can Learn to Let Go

Nonprofit leaders often have a hard time delegating. Jerry Hauser, CEO of The Management Center, shares why they do and how leaders can get away from the “I have to do it all” mindset.

To understand why nonprofit leaders often have a hard time delegating, says Jerry Hauser, CEO of [The Management Center](#), you need to understand the personality traits that got them where they are. Nonprofit leaders, he says, are often incredibly strong individual performers who rose to their positions by being highly talented, deeply committed to their work, and dedicated to very high standards. “They have a really high bar,” he notes, “and that adds up to leaders who are often control freaks.”

Hauser, however, doesn’t use the term pejoratively: “I use it as a compliment; it’s a good thing. That tendency means they care deeply about the work and have really high standards, which are often what it takes to make progress on the tough issues nonprofits address.”

But that same tendency can lead to a wide range of problems both for leaders and their organizations. Staff members can feel that they aren’t being allowed—or even trusted—to do their jobs. Board members may wonder if the leader is putting enough time into larger strategic issues. The leaders themselves may get frustrated and feel overworked and less effective.

Hauser says there are solutions, and that they don’t involve simply telling the leaders to lighten up and lower their standards. Instead, leaders need to identify the reasons behind their need for control and apply approaches for dealing with those reasons effectively.

Approach #1: Focus on the Comparative Advantage

Some people think “comparative advantage” and jump to “If I’m better at anything than someone else, then I should do it myself.” But that isn’t really what comparative advantage is about, Hauser says. “Leaders should focus on the areas where the gap between what they could produce and what others could produce is the biggest,” he says. That’s where the organization will gain the greatest benefit.

What Should You Delegate?

Use this worksheet from The Management Center to help determine what you can delegate by asking yourself where your impact is greater than your staff’s.

[Download the worksheet >>](#)

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For example, a leader might be the best at adapting the design of a program or putting together a budget. But there should be others in the organization who are at least reasonably good at those things. And over time, the leader will want to build a team of people who are better at those things than he or she is. Even in the short run, however, the leader is likely dramatically better suited to do things like forming new partnerships, raising money, or designing a new program. And, Hauser says, those are the places where leaders should focus while they delegate the rest.

Approach #2: Build the Team You Need

But what happens when the leader feels she doesn't have the right people to delegate those other pieces of work to? This often can be the case, Hauser says, and that "what on the surface looks like a delegation problem is actually a people problem." For example, let's say a leader has a project and it really ought to go to her head of communications, but she just doesn't have the confidence that he will do it well. The leader first needs to give him a chance to develop his skills. "But if he can't," Hauser says, "the leader might need a different head of communications."

In fact, Hauser says, often the leader's instincts are absolutely right, and the particular project shouldn't be delegated. "But the problem is that a leader can't stop there and just try to do everything herself," he asserts. "She needs to say, 'Well, this is a people problem, and I need to take this on by strengthening my teams so that I do have people to whom I feel confident delegating.'"

And Hauser has seen the impact of having the right people in the right jobs. "I've heard someone say of a certain leader, 'He's such a control freak, he'll never delegate that.' And then all of a sudden the leader gets the right person on the team—someone he trusts—and that problem goes away and, he starts delegating, and he is incredibly happy."

Approach #3: Guide More, Do Less

Even if they have the proper team with the proper skills, leaders need to be ready take the next step themselves and trust others to get the work done. But often leaders question just how to balance how much involvement they should have in the process.

"Leaders often ask us about micromanagement," says Hauser. "Am I too hands-on? Too hands-off?" The answer is often "yes" to both questions. "In our experience, leaders are simultaneously too hands-on and too hands-off," he says. When it comes to making sure their expectations are clear or touching base along the way to make sure the work is on track, leaders are too hands-off, and then when things go off track, they micromanage and often redo the work they delegated.

Check-In Meetings: Sample Agenda

Regular check-in meetings between a manager and a staff member are a key tool to discuss current projects, balance priorities, and provide feedback.

[Download the agenda >>](#)

Taking the time up front to set clear expectations and taking the time to check in during the process can help. This way leaders can ensure projects stay on track and meet goals—and, in the process, they can begin to gain the confidence to delegate more and bigger tasks.

By applying these approaches, leaders can slowly wean themselves from the “I have to do it all” mindset. They will find that the work will still be done at the expected level of quality. Employees will feel trusted to do their jobs. And the leaders themselves will have more time to focus on the largest, most critical issues facing their organizations.