

Delegation is the act of assigning or granting authority and responsibility to a person or group. Delegation extends a group's power and increases its capacity for accomplishing tasks.

History and Background

Delegation is an element common to all societies. It may not be named, but it is going on all the time. In hierarchical organizations there is an assumption that tasks are delegated to subordinates by superiors: the boss tells underlings what to do on behalf of the organization. Governments delegate responsibility to individuals and charge them with carrying out the best interests of the country. People elect others to represent them in Congress and other seats of power. In horizontal organizations, the group delegates individuals or clusters of members to carry out certain responsibilities on behalf of the whole group.

Jesus delegated authority and responsibility to the disciples as he sent them out into the country to preach and teach. In the Great Commission (Matthew 28), Jesus authorized people and asked them to be responsible to "go and make disciples of all nations ... baptizing ... and teaching ..."

Delegation involves people. When delegation, as in the church, is not coercive, it is based on trust and has the potential for helping people grow.

The health and effectiveness of organizations and social structures depend on the ability of those groups to delegate and of others to accept the authority and responsibility delegated.

Common Practices

Patterns of delegation vary. Church constitutions and bylaws prescribe some patterns of delegation. By outlining the duties and authority of elected officers, the church describes some ways it delegates. Individuals or groups may appoint others to carry out responsibilities on their behalf. The chairperson may ask two people to prepare worship for the next committee meeting. The committee may appoint a representative to an ecumenical meeting. The successful accomplishment of a group's goals depends upon effective delegation and the acceptance and follow-through of delegated responsibilities.

Principles of Delegation

Indicate the following when delegating:

- A clear definition of the task.
- The quality of the desired results. Do you want a draft or a paper ready for printing? Are you expecting a written agenda or suggestions for topics to place on the agenda?

- The deadline for completion of the task.
- Limits of authority, if any. Do they need further approval before spending money? Can they speak out freely but need to bring a statement to the entire group before signing a public statement?
- Relevant information or the source of such information.
- Acceptance of the delegated responsibility by the person or group requested to take on a task.
- Method of communicating and reporting during and at the end of the task.
- Thanks to those who accomplished the task when it is finished.

Skills and Attributes Needed to Delegate

- Ability to analyze what needs to be done.
- Ability to recognize others' gifts.
- Ability to match individuals' gifts with the group's needs.
- Commitment to the group's mission and ministry.
- Comfort in inviting others to participate in the group's mission and ministry.
- Willingness to let people carry out their tasks without interference.
- Ability to view the broad picture.
- Ability to keep track of a number of delegated tasks.

Ways to Increase Skills, Knowledge and Effectiveness

- Practice analyzing programs or tasks for ways to delegate.
- Talk with people who regularly delegate as part of their daily lives.
- Read books and articles on delegation. A reference librarian can help you locate delegation in materials on management.
- Ask for a brief training program on delegation for chairpersons of committees.
- Discuss delegation in groups, outlining expectations, its importance, and how it can be used.

Issues Facing the Church

- How can a church allow elected leaders to take initiative in responsible ways while protecting the checks and balances of congregational responsibility and authority?
- How can a church deal with the problems that sometimes occur with delegation, such as lack of follow-through or overstepping authority?
- Appropriate delegation can allow a board to focus on broader issues of mission and ministry. Are there obstacles to approaching these issues which cause your governing body to hang on to detail work and problem resolution?

Questions

- What is delegation?
- When is it appropriate to delegate?
- In what ways does your church now delegate?
- To whom could you talk about delegation in your church that would lead to more effective delegation?