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Business Mindset III

How to Increase Delegation and Trust as a Business Leader



How to Increase Delegation and Trust as a Business Leader

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Through coaching, training and consultancy, Kate's expertise and support transforms the way people think and behave, helping people and businesses to thrive.





Do you find it difficult to delegate?

As a leader of a small business – at least to start with - we wear many hats; designing products and services, accounting, marketing, the list goes on! We pride ourselves on getting things done and doing things well. Often, this entrepreneurial drive is what has got us to the point of owning and running a successful company. In a growing business we might recruit people to cover specific tasks, but it seems the workload mounts up and we take on more and more.

But as our businesses evolve, a shift is required from this entrepreneurial style towards delegation and leadership. The shaper and controller must learn to let go and build entrepreneurial teams otherwise they themselves will get in the way of the business.

Most of us know we could probably delegate more but there are many reasons why we might find this hard to do. This article outlines some of the insights gained both from coaching business owners and leaders, and from research into business performance. It summarises the benefits of effective delegation, discusses some of the practical and psychological barriers to delegating, and suggests what you can do to get better at it.



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Why do I need to delegate?

When we fail to delegate it has negative consequences for us, for employees and for our business.

We can feel overloaded, overwhelmed, stressed, and burnt out. We keep going for as long as we can, running on adrenaline and trying to keep on top of things. This is bad news for our bodies and our minds. It becomes harder for us to do a good job as we have so much to do. We might end up procrastinating important jobs until we find time to do them ourselves. It is also likely to have a detrimental effect on our life outside work.

But successful delegation is not just about saving ourselves time and stress. The employees of a leader who fails to delegate can feel undervalued and frustrated by the lack of development opportunities. They could perceive lack of delegation as a lack of trust, and feel undervalued by the organisation. If a leader does delegate to staff but does so badly – for example by micromanaging – employees can feel discouraged from taking initiative, undervalued, and frustrated by the lack of autonomy. This is not the way to develop an entrepreneurial team!

Employees will be less satisfied and less likely to stick around. We will have less time for strategy and actual leadership.

It is not possible to scale and develop as a business if you are struggling to delegate; become preoccupied with firefighting and simply don't have time for the most important business decisions.



What are the benefits of successful delegation?

When we delegate successfully, we feel better, experience less stress, and have more capacity to focus on leadership and strategy. We can make work more rewarding for our employees too. We can motivate and empower employees by delegating to them, making the most of their strengths.

We can benefit from fresh perspectives and new ways of doing things. We allow employees to grow and develop in skills and confidence. Our teams become more competent, reliable, and satisfied. Dynamics, relationships, and the culture of the business can improve too. When leaders delegate successfully employees view us more positively . Effective delegation builds a sense of mutual trust between leaders and employees. Employees feel valued.

The increase in wellbeing, competence and confidence translates into better business results too. Research shows that delegation has a positive impact on business growth in SMEs . When leaders delegate some of their authority, this is associated with higher growth in sales and more professional operations .



Why is successful delegation so difficult?

It seems like a no brainer. So why don't we do it? There are several practical concerns and psychological challenges that we might face.

From a practical perspective, we must decide **what** to delegate, **who** to delegate to, and find the **time** to delegate effectively. This is easier said than done! We must choose someone we trust will do a good job. This is tricky as we will still ultimately be accountable for the work they do. We need to take time (often, time we feel we do not have) explaining what the result should be. And time dealing with the 'fallout' if we're not happy with the outcome. It can feel like an inefficient use of time when we already know how to do the task.

Successful delegation is also strongly reliant upon **strong communication skills** and a **culture in which people feel safe to speak up** if they do not understand or are facing challenges.



Why is successful delegation so difficult cont.?

Then there are the psychological challenges.

Many business owners are **fiercely independent** and find it hard to give up control. They are driven to protect 'their' business. For entrepreneurs who have led the business since its inception it can be harder to hand over the reins as the business becomes part of their identity and they form a strong emotional attachment to it. Research into family firms shows they are traditionally more centralised and delegate differently, so it is difficult to hand over control to someone who is not in this 'inner circle.'

Many business owners have very high standards and describe themselves as **perfectionists**. They strive for excellence, and they struggle when they themselves or others fail to meet these standards. Their fear of a mistake being made makes it difficult for them to trust others to do a good job of a delegated task. This can lead to a stifling culture where the business owner tries to maintain close control over everything, micromanaging and being overly prescriptive. No one wants to step out of their comfort zone for fear of the consequences.



Why is successful delegation so difficult cont.?

Some business owners are **concerned about what others might think** if they delegate to them. They think it will make them unpopular, or even (though it is hard to admit) that they might be shown up by someone who does a better job of it than they can. Recent research suggests that societal expectations and pressures on women can make it more difficult for some women to delegate due to concerns about appearing 'bossy' (when they are actually just being assertive).

Some business owners avoid delegation entirely or avoid giving meaningful feedback at the end of the process because they feel **uncomfortable giving difficult feedback**.

It is also difficult to avoid a sense of **guilt** if the people you would like to delegate to are already very busy.

It can be the case that you enjoy the tasks that you should be delegating and so you are resistant to passing them on. Maybe you find this more interesting or easier to do than your leadership duties.



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What can I do about it?

Did any of these barriers seem familiar to you? Were these practical, psychological, or a bit of both? Here are some tips for addressing the practical and psychological barriers.

Addressing the practical barriers:

Step 1: What to delegate

It can be helpful to write down everything you do and sort it into high value (things only you can do) and low value (things to delegate or stop). As business leaders these high value things should include core leadership duties (such as providing a vision, praise, or nurturing talent). Other high value things could fall into others' job descriptions or may align with areas where staff want to develop, so you can plan to upskill these staff.

Remember that wise leaders do not try to do it all. They ask for help and accept it when offered.



Addressing the practical barriers:

Step 2: Who to delegate to

Tasks should be passed to people with the right skills and motivation. If time is tight, choose someone who has done it before. If not, it could be an opportunity to develop someone else. Build relationships with staff and find out what energises them. Play to their strengths and motivations. It should be a win-win situation whereby you both benefit.

The decision about who to delegate to can be made on your own or with others, as appropriate, to keep everyone engaged and motivated. When the choice is made it is important to explain why they were chosen so that they understand your motivation. This is also a good opportunity to build their confidence

Addressing the practical barriers:

Step 3: Finding the time to delegate well

Successful delegation depends on finding the time to do **all** the key steps in the delegation process (it should never be a case of just 'dumping' a task on someone) because if you skip any the outcome is likely to be compromised.

The remaining steps are:

Step 4: Explaining what the task is and why it is important (this is vital for motivation)

Step 5: Defining the goal / expected results

Step 6: Providing any upskilling required and checking understanding

Step 7: Agreeing a timeline

Step 8: Providing ongoing support

Step 9: Two-way feedback discussion.



Addressing the practical barriers:

The amount of time the process takes will vary depending on the skill and experience of the person you delegate to. But there should be clear communication at each point, even with the most experienced staff. Too many leaders assume that their staff know what good should look like **(step 5)**. This should always be made explicit. However, there is a difference between being clear about the result versus being overly prescriptive about how to reach it – this can turn into micromanagement. Where appropriate (i.e., where following a specific process is not critical and where staff feel comfortable to do so) try to give staff some autonomy as to how they complete the task.

To effectively check understanding **(step 6)** and provide ongoing support **(step 8)**, there needs to be a culture in which people feel safe to ask questions and admit if there are any issues, without fear of any negative consequences. This is known as ‘psychological safety’. You need to be approachable. If someone is put off trying to approach you or speaking up, you may not discover issues effecting the task until it is too late. It needs to be easy for them to ask you for help if they need it. See more on building a good culture in *article 2*.

Addressing the practical barriers:

Some people feel uncomfortable about the feedback discussion **(step 9)**. What if the task has not been completed properly? In the highest performing companies this is treated as a learning opportunity for you both. Difficult though it might be, it is important not to fixate on the negative or to belittle staff. Express thanks and explore the reasons why it did not go as expected. It should be a two-way discussion. As well as discussing whether the goal was met, this is a great opportunity to discuss what each of you learned from the process (and a great way for you to develop your delegation skills). Was the right person chosen? Did you check in enough, or too much? Were you clear about the goal? Try to learn from it so it does not happen again.

It is important to see all these steps as an investment of your time. Yes, it will be time consuming at first but over time this will pay off and you will have much more time to focus on running the business. Furthermore, it is vital to remember that success is measured by so much more than time saved. The development of a positive culture where employees feel valued, trusted, invested in, and committed, and where relationships are better, where people feel able to share ideas... these are huge contributors to business success.



Addressing the psychological barriers

You can start to overcome the psychological barriers to delegation by reframing what you are telling yourself about it.

- After reading this article you should be clear on the need to delegate. If you are still resisting handing over control because of **fierce independence and emotional attachment**, think about the longer-term impact (in and outside work) of continuing this way versus making a change.
- What does success mean to you as a **perfectionist**? What is a job well done? Is this realistic? What could a more helpful belief be? For example, could success be about having time to lead the important parts of the business? Could it be giving someone on the team a learning opportunity? Could it be about benefiting from an empowered, engaged, and upskilled team?
- How could you think about 'failure' if it happens? What can you learn from it?
- Think about your perception of what makes a good leader. **Are you being a good leader** if you are trying to do all the things, and not empowering others? A good leader brings out the best in others. By allowing others to grow and develop will make you a better leader and all will benefit.



Addressing the psychological barriers

- If you are **concerned about others** resenting your delegation or regarding you as bossy, or you are feeling **guilty** about adding to their workload, try reframing delegation as being primarily about developing your team (which it should be!) rather than getting things off your plate. Research shows that staff are far more likely to be engaged, satisfied, and view you positively if you **DO** delegate. If your staff are already very busy it is necessary to look at bigger issues and prioritise. This key leadership duty can only be carried out if you have time to look at the bigger picture.
- If you avoid giving **feedback** for fear of upsetting people, bear in mind the pointers already mentioned. Remember that providing the chance to develop, and offering constructive feedback, is one of the most helpful things you can do for your staff. Avoiding development and feedback is not helping them.
- Finally, if you are **reluctant to let go of a task you enjoy**, ask yourself why? Do you need a new challenge? If you enjoy the fact that it is easy and routine compared to your other tasks, is it that you are over spending energy elsewhere?



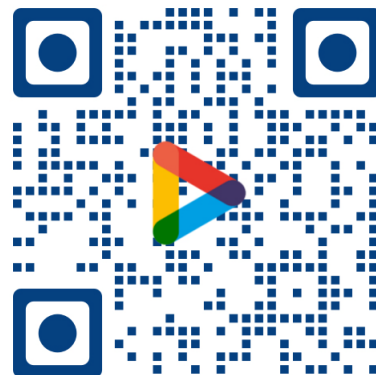
Concluding thoughts...

Think about making gradual changes out of your comfort zone and learn to let go progressively. Start by delegating simpler tasks while you build confidence and trust in your staff.

If we want to build a successful and growing company, we need to be able to let go of the reins and upskill a talented team who will contribute to the vision and values of the company. Failure to delegate is unsustainable. Successful delegation requires practical skills in planning and communication. It may also require courage to challenge your beliefs about success and good leadership. Hopefully, by reading through this article you will have gained some tips on changing your mindset towards delegation so that you, your employees, and your business will benefit. If you take a planned approach, covering all the key steps, you can gradually build your confidence and competence in this critical skill.



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