

Empowerment and Delegation



Jack Kelly Clark

Shared decision making can improve the quality and acceptance of decisions, bolster worker motivation and self-esteem, increase sense of ownership and improve interpersonal relations with employees. But it is not always easy to delegate. A farmer wondered why his workers came directly to him with their problems and questions, skipping right over the foreman. Upon further reflection, this grower realized that he was encouraging this behavior by answering questions and solving problems for the employees. Instead, he needed to support his foreman by having employees go to him with these matters.

There is a tricky balance, here, however. While workers should feel a need to work out day-to-day issues directly with the farm foreman, the door

should be left open for workers to sense that the farmer can also listen to them. At one farm operation, the grower made it clear to the employees that his door was open to listen if they ever needed to talk. As soon as the farmer would leave the field, however, the foreman would close that door, by telling employees that they were *not to ever bother the grower*.

Delegation and empowerment work best when done in small increments. Sometimes farm employers will over-delegate. And when the employee fails, much of this newly given responsibility is taken away. Instead, as the employee succeeds at increasingly difficult tasks, more can be delegated. When delegating, it is a wonderful feeling to know the employee will do the job just



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as well, if not better, than you would. To accomplish this, the supervisor needs to *test for employee understanding* before delegating.

The best way of doing this is by using the quality control calibration procedure outlined in Chapter 11. For instance, one dairy farmer wanted to delegate to a working herdsman some decisions based on cow body condition. They had been working together on this project for some time. This dairyman selected one hundred cows and evaluated their body condition. Then, he gave the same list of cows to the herdsman and had him do his own evaluations from scratch. The two were then able to compare notes and discuss each cow individually.

INVOLVING WORKERS IN DECISION MAKING¹

Decision making is the crux of management in any enterprise. In most business organizations, responsibilities are divided between “those who think” and “those who do.” Though farmers typically engage in more “doing” than the average executive, often they also carry the whole thinking load.

A strict separation of manager and employee roles sends the message to workers that they are only responsible for what they are specifically told to do. But how much stock might be saved, damage avoided, and work improvement generated if the minds connected to all those hired hands were tapped? Involving people in decision making transfers power to subordinates.

Some supervisors think failing to maintain tight control may be seen as a sign of weakness. Others simply find their use of authority very satisfying. Finally, there are those who are concerned their subordinates would not make decisions or discharge responsibilities well.

Levels of involvement

A supervisor may usefully include others in virtually every decision. *When* and *to what extent* to involve workers are key management choices. There are several approaches to decision making. At one extreme is the traditional use of managerial authority in decision making or the “boss-centered” style. At the opposite extreme is a management style with high worker involvement, an “employee-centered” style. Five approaches within such a continuum are discussed in this subsection to illustrate the differences in decision-making philosophy.² This categorization of decision-making approaches can be applied to any kind of management decision.

1. Tell them. The supervisor makes the decision and announces it. He identifies a problem, considers alternative solutions, chooses one, and then reports it to subordinates as an order for implementation. He may or may not consider what employees will think about the decision. In any case, he provides no chance for them to participate in the decision-making process: “Please go ahead and start baling the alfalfa now.”

2. Sell them. The supervisor makes the decision and explains her reasoning to employees in an effort to gain their acceptance. She takes responsibility for identifying the problem and generating



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the solution, but she recognizes the possibility of some resistance among those who will have to execute it. She may indicate to employees what they have to gain from her decision: “Start baling now. It has dried enough to keep from molding, and it may get too tricky to handle if we let it dry any more.”

3. Check with them. The supervisor presents his decision as an idea and invites questions and comments. Here the boss has arrived at a tentative decision but provides an explanation of his thinking and gives subordinates an opportunity to influence it. He retains the initiative for diagnosing the problem and the final decision for himself but solicits reactions from affected employees: “I’m thinking of buying that new XK tractor. It has plenty of power for the money and Katsuhiko says his has been very reliable. What do you think, given what we have to use it for?”

4. Include them: The boss presents a problem, asks employees for ideas and suggestions, and then makes her decision. Again, the supervisor ultimately decides, but the employees

provide and analyze much of the information on which the decision is based. The boss benefits from their knowledge and experience: “Our records show we had twice as many back injuries during harvest this year as in any of the previous five. Why do you think it happened, and what can I do about it for the next year?”

5. Involve them: The supervisor passes to employees the decision-making responsibility. He points to a problem, outlines constraints on solutions, and essentially commits himself to accepting whatever the employees decide within prescribed boundaries. The employees diagnose the problem and consider alternative ways of handling it. If the boss participates in the decision-making process, he does so as an equal member of the group involved: “We’ve got to plant all 20 sections by Wednesday, and only six of our rigs are working. Let me know if you guys can possibly get it done, how, and what extra expenses we’ll have to incur.”

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Regardless of approach, the supervisor needs to carefully communicate with subordinates about their role in the decision process. For example, a supervisor may only want to check out a decision he intends to make himself, but workers get the idea he is delegating the responsibility to them. Confusion and resentment are likely to follow.

Bound for even greater difficulty is the supervisor who knows exactly what he wants and tries using a “democratic front” to get workers to think his idea is theirs. Most people can smell that act coming a mile away.

Even if he wants to involve employees as much as possible, a supervisor cannot delegate any more responsibility than he has from his own boss. Clear limits need to be set. Of course, employees will lose their taste for involvement if no action results from the decision they help formulate.

Several factors bear on the desirability of the various alternatives. In general, they can be grouped as attributes of the supervisor, the employee(s), or the situation.

Attributes of the supervisor

A supervisor’s own beliefs and personality usually predispose her to favor more or less employee involvement.

1. Value system. Some supervisors strongly believe employees should participate in decisions affecting them. Others feel involving workers in management work is passing the buck. Such views obviously influence the approach to decision making. Another key value question is the relative importance the supervisor attaches to short-term efficiency and long-term employee development. The latter is more consistently served by involvement.

2. Need for control and certainty. When a supervisor releases some control over decision making, he reduces the predictability of its outcome. Supervisors with more tolerance for ambiguity and surprise are more comfortable delegating than their risk-averse counterparts.

3. Leadership habits and inclinations. Some supervisors function more naturally as highly directive leaders. Resolving problems and issuing orders come easily to them. Others are more comfortable and experienced in sharing their work with subordinates. Some supervisors perpetuate styles they learned earlier in their careers.

4. Confidence in subordinates. Supervisors who have more trust in other people generally, and in their subordinates specifically, are better able to solicit and effectively utilize employee participation in decision making.

Attributes of the employee

A supervisor’s confidence in his workers may depend partly on his general inclinations but certainly ought to also be based upon employee ability and interest. Most workers enjoy responsibility if they are given the training, materials, time, and freedom to act.

Some employees blame everyone but themselves when things go wrong. Others may only pretend to follow instructions. With their look or voice they may say, “See, it doesn’t work.” Some workers may try making the supervisor feel guilty for delegating a task. One employee, for instance, scared his supervisors into not assigning jobs to him with such comments as, “What, you want me to drop everything and do it right now?” Effective interpersonal skills are critical when dealing with employees, especially when difficulties arise.

Individuals respond differently to decision-making opportunities. It is crucial to remember, however, that most employees are capable of significantly expanding their skills. How they develop is partly influenced by their supervisor’s expectations.

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The foreman with enough confidence to delegate part of an important decision is likely to be rewarded with both an immediate contribution and a more experienced, confident employee to whom she can delegate even more tomorrow. You have probably heard about a “troublemaker” or “goof-off” from one ranch who moved on to become a highly valued performer at another. Though personal circumstances often play a role in such turnabouts, so do different management styles. Some workers give the job their best as long as the supervisor stays away.

Involving employees is usually more productive if workers possess:

- knowledge and experience relevant to the issue at hand,
- interest in the issue and appreciation of its importance,
- understanding of, and overall agreement with, goals of the business,
- desire for autonomy, responsibility and growth,
- tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, as opposed to need for firm structure, and
- previous involvement in decision making.

Attributes of the situation

Finally, the appropriate approach varies with the situation.

1. The problem itself. More involvement is called for when (a) information relevant to the problem is widely dispersed in the organization, and (b) employee acceptance is critical to the implementation of whatever decision is made. Identifying the cause of a rash of equipment breakdowns cannot be done alone in the comfort of one’s own office.

Complex decisions require broader involvement, but simple ones may be delegated directly to those employees who have the necessary information. Who is better situated than the tractor driver to decide when to fill its gas tank?

Most decisions recurring routinely, such as tank filling, supply ordering, and stock culling, are permanently delegated through job descriptions. Managers can exert considerable control over delegated decisions by narrowing the decision maker’s area of discretion.

An observant labor contractor once noted his workers took much better care of their own equipment than his. Similarly, people are more likely to accept and implement decisions they have participated in making.

2. Time pressures. In the short run shared decision making generally takes longer than unilateral action. It is not surprising to find crisis-ridden ranches that often operate with a highly authoritarian management style. The pattern perpetuates itself since boss-centered responses to crises do little to develop staff capacity.

3. Organizational traditions and values. Organizations tend to select, promote, and retain people who fit in with their prevailing management philosophy. “The way we’ve always done it here,” has a profound impact on how it will be done in the future.

Research has found that participatory approaches are, in general, associated with higher levels of employee motivation, acceptance of and adaptability to change, managerial decision quality, teamwork and morale, and individual employee development. When decision-making responsibilities are shared, slumbering organizations often “wake up.” Workers will increase their expectations of both themselves and the organization. Once employees feel involved, and part of the farming enterprise, their appetite for shared decision making is likely to grow.

DELEGATION FOLLOW THROUGH

The previous discussion dealt with the who, what, and why of delegating decisions. Following through is just as important but much simpler. Despite such simplicity, however, projects often fail because of lack of follow through. It helps to get into the habit of noting in

your agenda or calendar those situations that may require a possible follow up call or reminder from you.

Whether delegating menial jobs or high-powered decision-making assignments, there are some basic requirements. At the very least, employees need to understand clearly what is expected of them and when their assignments are due to be completed.

Do you find yourself delegating work but sometimes wondering when or if it got done? Do you ever feel uneasy about checking up on the employee, fearing you may convey a feeling of mistrust? If you answered yes to either of these questions, you may want to try a work order form (see Figure 13–1). You can design a form to fit your needs. A separate form can be used per job, or a single one can serve for many positions.

The form is not a substitute for clear communication. With new employees or tasks, you will want to provide training and close supervision. Employees who do not understand what is expected of them need to feel comfortable asking for clarification.

The form provides a place to tell employees what you want them to do, how important this task is in comparison to other tasks assigned to them, when the request was given, and how soon you expect it to be completed. The priority code along with the “date wanted” helps employees prioritize their efforts in accord to what is most important to you.

Workers can be trained to communicate with you when given unrealistic assignments. For instance, they may want to negotiate for a later completion date. In time, employees will grasp what is most important to you, and you can skip the “date wanted” section.

In some cases you may want to go over assignments with employees and ask for their input on a reasonable completion date—or a timetable with a series of sub-goals. If it is a job that will require a progress report at specific intervals, you may indicate this on the form, too. If several unrelated tasks are

delegated, it helps to use different forms to track each one.

The middle part of the form consists of typical tasks you delegate to the employee, as well as space to provide specific instructions. The list of delegated tasks may be refined with time, so you may not want to print too many forms the first time.

The bottom left of the form has a space for you to initial your request. The employee will, upon completion of the assignment, also initial and date the form. Finally, to complete the feedback process, you will initial the form (bottom right) thanking the employee. From time to time, you may want to add an extra word of positive feedback and encouragement to express your gratitude, such as, “well done!”

Employees experience the satisfaction of completing, and being thanked for, specific assignments. Feelings of gratitude directed to employees are of great importance. A worker lamented the fact that the farmer would tell everyone else what a great job he was doing but had never told him directly.

With such forms, employees do not have to guess what is important to their boss. Forms also preserve performance history. Records may also provide useful data for job analyses, job evaluations, or

To: _____		Priority: <input type="checkbox"/> High <input type="checkbox"/> Med <input type="checkbox"/> Low	
Date submitted:	____/____/____		
Date wanted:	____/____/____		
Date completed:	____/____/____		
Re: _____		Please:	
<input type="checkbox"/> Breed	<input type="checkbox"/> Call Veterinarian	<input type="checkbox"/> Purchase	
<input type="checkbox"/> Fix / Treat	<input type="checkbox"/> Trim hoofs	<input type="checkbox"/> Check	
<input type="checkbox"/> See me	<input type="checkbox"/> _____		
Comments: _____			

Thanks, Andrea _____ TNX _____			

FIGURE 13–1
Work Order form.

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performance appraisals (as well as ongoing feedback). Planning worker training or conducting a disciplinary procedure may also be facilitated.

You may want to keep extra blank forms handy in your pickup or at home. Employees need to keep blank forms, too, as an easy way of letting you know about tasks they have carried out on their own initiative, or when completing assignments for which you did not provide a form.

SUMMARY

Shared decision making can lead to better decisions, increase communication with employees, bolster worker motivation, and increase acceptance of difficult decisions. While delegation may save time in the long run, it takes more time in the short term. Circumstances are critical, as are both the supervisor's and the subordinate's skills and perspectives. Whether delegating routine jobs or important decision-making assignments, supervisors also need to assure instructions are clear, communicate the limits of the shared decision-making power, and see that tasks are carried out in a timely fashion.

CHAPTER 13 REFERENCES

1. This sub-section is adapted from Rosenberg, H. R, and Billikopf, G. E. (1984, March 6-9). How and When to Involve Workers in Decision Making (pp. 12-13). *The Dairyman*.
2. Tannenbaum R., and Schmidt, W. (1973, May-June). How to Choose a Leadership Pattern. *Harvard Business Review*.