

# FINANCIAL TIMES

## The manager's fear of delegating

By Naomi Shragai

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A young chief executive who founded a thriving company appears to be at the peak of his success. But instead of enjoying his achievement, he is stressed and overwhelmed with responsibility. His problem is a failure to delegate work.

“The company is a triangle and I feel at the bottom of it, holding everything up,” is how he expresses his dilemma. Although he envies managers who are able to delegate, he feels unable to, believing that the company is an extension of himself and his personality.

He adds: “I make these emotional connections and I believe that what I do is about the relationships I make with people. I never wanted to delegate for fear of losing my clients.”

Although most executives would agree that delegating is crucial to a business's success, many still micromanage in such a way that they continue to control most aspects of the work.

For many, the skill of delegating can be learnt. But when an executive fails to do so even if it is essential to the growth and functioning of the business, the problem may be more deep-rooted. Beliefs that I have come across in my psychotherapy practice, such as “this business is all about me”; “no one can do it as well as me”; or “people are likely to let me down”, are all justifications that sabotage delegation.

One consequence of these beliefs is that staff being managed can feel undermined or undervalued, and may soon lose interest in their jobs. The harm to the company can be twofold, according to Jeannie Hodder, a business coach who works at London Business School. First, micromanaged staff cease thinking for themselves, and without imaginative input the company is deprived of innovative ideas and can stagnate. Second, overly hands-on executives can be left feeling overburdened and stressed, and without time to devise strategy.

Conversely, executives to whom delegation comes more easily say it has been crucial to their business's success. “Empowering people is the absolute key to it,” says Charles Wace, founder and chief executive of Twofour Group, the UK independent television production company behind such programmes as Educating Essex, Happy Families and Alex Polizzi – The Fixer. His approach has been to work with clever people and enthuse them: “If you manage to employ people who are brighter and more talented than you, then you're doing very well. It makes good sense to hire brilliant people and give them their head, rather than hire mediocre people and make yourself look good.”

Matthew Stone, a business coach who heads The Stone Partnership, has extensive experience of the problem of delegation. “Such executives have negative assumptions about what their staff can do, and the result is that people tend to replicate these low expectations,” he says. “The manager may hold a rigid belief that his or her approach is the only one. This attitude does not allow people to develop their own ways of working, which in turn leads to staff trying to second-guess what the manager wants rather than developing their own process.”

One CEO told me that when he finally forced himself to delegate, he suffered withdrawal symptoms. For him the “kick” from being the one to, in effect, “pull the deal off” was almost addictive. “When you delegate there is a loss of excitement of meeting the target, and suddenly you have to share it,” he says.

He admits that he prefers to retain work where there is praise to be had. “It's very important for me to get praise and recognition. One of the reasons I've been more successful is my insecurity combined with drive. I believe insecurity makes people driven.”

In my experience as a psychotherapist, some men who crave recognition may have had absent fathers or ones that ignored them. As a result they may tend to withhold praise from others in the way that their fathers withheld it from them or because they want it for themselves.

There are other potential emotional wounds from delegating. By drawing back from their team and letting them get on with it, managers feel less involved and more isolated. There is also the acknowledgment that others can do the job as well, and in some cases better, which can be a bitter pill to swallow.

“Delegation can be difficult because it always involves dependency on others, and [some] people cannot bear depending on anyone, no matter how capable they might be,” says Kerry Sulkowicz, a psychoanalyst and founder of Boswell Group, a New York consultancy that specialises in advising chief executives on the psychological aspects of their work. “Dependency may make them feel weak and vulnerable, repeating some early life experience in which they were dependent on someone who failed or hurt them.”

This applies to another CEO I spoke to, who manages a financial services company. He felt guilty if he was not available to micromanage his team, constantly worrying that he was letting them down.

He was convinced it was his role to solve everyone’s problems and would not allow his staff to find their own solutions. Consequently, contrary to feeling supported, they felt he did not trust them.

Digging into his background, it became clear that the origin of this lay in his childhood, when he had the responsibility of looking after his depressed mother once his father had left the family. Because he had no adult figure he could rely on, he came to believe that no one was trustworthy. Once he understood this link to his childhood, he was better equipped to make informed choices at work.

Mr Wace believes that trusting people is not enough – you also have to take risks and let them make mistakes. He adds that a further benefit for his company is that, by allowing others to manage its day-to-day running, he is free to see the bigger picture and plan for the future.

Another CEO who successfully made the transition from micromanaging to delegating says: “I found in the end that I could get a ‘kick’ by seeing my team come together successfully and that wonderful sense of achievement when you see others doing it as well or better. You can get a warm glow from successful delegation that can balance all the losses from letting go of work.”

## **Warning signs: Checklist to test your reluctance to delegate**

### **1. Staffing**

- Your staff are not bringing you their ideas and concerns. This may indicate that they find you unapproachable and closed-minded.
- There is a high turnover of staff.

### **2. Teamwork**

- You treat everyone the same, implying that you have failed to see the unique differences in the team.
- You take all the successes and failures of the business as your own.

### **3. Trust**

- You cannot trust others to do the job as well as you, and have low expectations for your staff’s performance.

### **4. Control**

- You believe it is up to you to solve all the company’s problems.
- When the business fails to thrive, your response is to control more of the work.

## **5. Mood**

- Your mood is low or you may have become depressed and/or anxious.
- You feel overwhelmed with responsibility

## **6. Home life**

- You cannot switch off from work and it disrupts your relationships at home.

## **7. Support**

- You have difficulties asking for help.
- Your dominant character trait is self-sufficiency.

*The writer is a psychotherapist and this article is partly based on her clinical experience. None of the individuals named are her clients*

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