



White Paper

## Building Trust through Effective Delegation

By John Parker Stewart & Daniel Stewart

Several years ago, one of the co-authors, John Parker Stewart, was coaching an exceptional executive. The client was having particular trouble with a manager that reported to him. During a conversation, the client related an experience that had happened to him earlier in his career. He stated that after years of hard work, he had become the company's expert in writing contracts. As the director of contracts, his staff would prepare draft contracts for his review and approval. He mentioned that he started a habit of taking home the drafts to rework them. He would spend extra hours at home ensuring that they were perfect in every way. This habit of taking work home continued for months.

As he was emptying his briefcase one night, he began his customary procedure of reworking the contracts. He selected a draft, started reading, and quickly became disgusted. The draft he was holding was the sorriest piece of work he had ever seen. It was shabby, was missing important components, and obviously needed multiple revisions. He thought to himself, "This is a piece of junk! How can I waste my time on this? It is absolutely pathetic and certainly not fixable in one night."

The next morning he entered the office upset. He called in the guy who wrote the incomplete contract and threw it down in front of him. The executive blurted out, pointing at the report, "That is a piece of trash. I read it in 10 minutes last night and thought, you didn't put more than 30 minutes into the entire effort." The employee just gave him an unwavering stare. Finally, the staff member responded, "You're right, I didn't."

The bold answer puzzled the executive and he responded, "Why not?"

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“‘Cause I knew you’d just take it home and rework it. That’s what you’ve done every time, isn’t it?” The employee just stood there in meek defiance as if to say, “I’ve learned your system. Why should I bust my back for three weeks on something that you’re going to completely rip apart and redo yourself?”

The awkwardness fell on the executive, not on the employee. Because of the experience, the executive realized that his method for reviewing contracts was a tremendous disservice to his people. He felt disconnected from his staff and became aware that something was wrong.

He consequently invited his staff together the next morning. Addressing everyone he stated, “It has come to my attention what I’ve been doing to you.” He explained his pattern of reworking nearly every contract. This practice, of course, was not a surprise to his staff, but the apology was.

He continued, “I should not completely redo your hard work—I apologize. I’ve realized that I’m doing all of you a tremendous disservice. If I redo all of your work, there is no way that you will be able to learn and have confidence in what you do. Besides, when do I have time to do my own job, when I’m always doing yours?” He asked for their understanding and assistance as he pledged to do better.

He improved at clarifying what needed to be done on each contract before his staff wrote them. And he allowed much of the contracts to go out without extensive reworking. He found he began receiving higher quality contracts and his people seemed more pleased to be at work. The executive’s recognition and willingness to change his debilitating style positively affected his staff’s entire attitude.

## Let Go of the Pencil

The story helps illustrate a commonly misunderstood concept: effective delegation. In coaching executives and managers, like the one in the previous story, we often use a leadership principle called, “Let go of the pencil, but don’t drop the reigns.” Let us explain.

Years ago Andy Grove, former CEO of Intel, illustrated this concept of delegating through the analogy of a pencil. Imagine a pencil representing a task or a job responsibility. Thus, each organization is full of pencils with each person being given an appropriate amount commensurate to his/her position.

Pretend you are Marie’s boss. You hold up a pencil and show it to Marie. You explain, “I have a very important task that I want you to complete. You have performed well in the past and I have great confidence in you. I know you’ll do an excellent job. Here’s the task...” As you start to give Marie the pencil, she attempts to take it, but you never let go.

Without finding anything odd about the interaction, you continue on with your day leaving Marie quite confused. You had told her the assignment was hers, but your actions don’t reinforce that message. You had even mentioned your confidence in her. Yet, you have not released the pencil and seem to take comfort in the fact you haven’t. What kind of a mixed signal are you sending to her?

As Marie continues her day, her mind repeats the same question: “Why won’t you let go of the pencil? Why won’t you give it to me? Don’t you trust me?” And that’s exactly the message you’re sending to her. Despite all the confidence you’ve expressed, your actions are telling her you do not trust her.

Continuing the analogy, now imagine you are holding in your other hand another pencil that you intended to give to Tom. Your left foot is holding onto another pencil you have given to another employee; and your right foot is holding onto two other pencils. Ironically, in an attempt to lessen your workload and show confidence in your employees, you have stretched yourself even further and have made it very clear you don't trust your people. You have placed yourself and your people in an uncomfortable, off-balanced—almost ridiculous—situation.

When you're holding on to all these pencils, who is doing your job? You're not in a position to do it—you are worrying about everyone else. You are preventing you and your employees from succeeding. They clearly are not able to do their job because you won't let them. It is a lose-lose situation. Now multiply this situation by ten or twenty other interactions throughout the day and it is no surprise your employees have trouble rising to the occasion.

*“Let go of the pencil, but don't drop the reins.”*

To remedy this situation, let go of the pencil. Express confidence in your employees' potential for success and give them the task. You'll most likely be pleasantly surprised with how well the job is done. Small changes will inevitably need to be made, but allow the majority of their work to be accepted without consistently reworking it. This will improve their self-confidence, help them grow, and enable you to focus on your own job.

There is a caution with this method of delegation, which constitutes the second half of the leadership principle: When you delegate, let go of the pencil—but don't drop the reins.

### **...But Don't Drop the Reins**

Picture yourself riding a horse. The one thing you never want to do is allow the reins to slip out of your hands. They are your method of control and communication with the horse. If you need to tell the horse to go a certain way, you adjust the reins. The horse needs you to hold onto the reins to let it know where to go. If you drop the reins both you and the horse will be frustrated and confused, and neither of you will likely reach your destination.

When you delegate, you indicate what needs to be done—the direction the employee needs to go. You let go of the pencil and allow and enable the employee to do the assignment. Yet, you must remain available as the employee works on the task. You must be the support system for the employee. You need to be there to answer the quick question, to offer clarification, to mentor, to encourage, to offer suggestions, to provide a signature if needed, to establish performance measures, and to congratulate.

If you let go of the reins, the employees will be left without a critical resource—you. Be available. Make it a priority to quickly return messages, clear away the interference, stand up for them, and provide the resources they need to complete the job. This is how you support and lead others. You don't abandon or abdicate your responsibility, but you send a clear signal that you support your employees in their assignments.

## **A Balancing Act**

Today, as organizations struggle to achieve growth and effective cost management, behave ethically, and strive to become a “great” company, delegation is more important than ever. A manager, at all levels of the organization, plays a pivotal role in the creation of a culture of internal development and leadership.

Thus, managers must learn how to balance trust and control. Letting go of the pencil displays confidence and good priority management to the employee. It helps convey a strong message that the manager knows how to lead, it builds a relationship of trust with the employee, and it can strengthen the employee’s future performance.

One of the greatest complaints employees voice is the inability to obtain adequate guidance from their supervisor. Holding onto the reigns overcomes this obstacle. It demonstrates a willingness to help and ensures the employee is appropriately guided with the task. It gives the manager an opportunity to demonstrate his/her ability to listen, and most importantly, it conveys to the employee that the manager cares.

The challenge is to succeed in this balancing act. Ask your people to help you. Be open to suggestions for personal improvement. Teach this principle to your people. Not only will your performance improve, but your people’s performance and attitude will soar as well. Remember, let go of the pencil, but hold onto the reigns.