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Officer Development Series – *Leadership Skills*



## **Delegation: Dividing tasks multiplies your chances of success**

By Deputy Chief Frank Viscuso

A Fire Officer will accomplish far more through effective delegation than he would by micromanaging and/or taking on 100% of the responsibility for every project (or problem) he encounters. Delegation is one of the most important aspects of time management. It's right up there with setting priorities and avoiding time wasting activities. As a Tour Commander, it would be impossible for me to arrive on the scene of a four car accident with entrapments and multiple injuries, and try to manage the scene, secure the area, extricate and treat the victims by myself. It would be ridiculous for me to even consider taking on all those roles. So why, when it comes to administrative tasks, do so many officers try to do just that? I've known many individuals in the fire service who have tried to do it all themselves only to have their personal performance and physical health deteriorate because of the stress and unnecessary burden they've invited into their lives.

Effective delegation is an absolute necessity when it comes to a department's success. Subsequently, failure to delegate will ultimately result in failure to adequately develop your team. In the end, everyone will suffer. Knowing how to delegate (and who to delegate to) will not only make your overall job easier, it will also show the rest of your company that you are a strong leader who has faith in them. The byproduct of which would be greater efficiency and increased morale across the board.

When leaders delegate responsibilities, they should give their team members the authority to take whatever actions necessary (legally, morally, and ethically, of course) to complete the task and achieve the desired end result. This holds just as true in corporate America as it does in the fire service. Once you assign a task, don't look over the shoulders of your subordinates and question why they are doing it "this way" rather than "that way." Instead, make it a priority to arrange things so the task can be completed without interruptions from you or anyone else that may impede progress.

Don't be fooled into thinking that delegation is the simple act of "passing the buck." As sure as there are rewards for proper delegation, there are absolute consequences for poor delegation. In order for supervisors to delegate effectively they should first feel secure about their own position and understand the talents, skills and abilities of those around them.

When you, as a Fire Officer, arrive first at a structure fire and establish command, and four more apparatus carrying 12 firefighters pull onto the scene after you, the first thing they will do is radio you, or walk up to the command post and ask, “What do you need?” Immediately, assignments are given out and off they go. One team will inevitably be assigned the job of searching the fire floor of the building, another will be sent in with a hose line with the task of confining the fire, and another will be assigned the job of ventilation. If the individuals leading these teams are well trained, you will not have to tell them how to do their assigned task, they’ll already know how – and they should know how, because firefighter’s train every day for that reason. As a Chief Officer, when I arrive on the fire ground, I give out an assignment knowing with 100% confidence that it is going to be completed within an acceptable timeframe. I know this because I understand the strengths, skills and abilities of each of my officers and firefighters. Being in this position takes the weight of the world off my shoulders.

The same way you delegate assignments on the fire ground is the way you should delegate tasks around the fire house. This is true whether you are assigning housework, or tackling administrative projects, such as developing a fire prevention community awareness program. A smart officer will gather facts and accomplish specific tasks by effectively delegating those tasks to the appropriate firefighters. Delegation should happen in the planning, research, development, implementation and evaluation stages of all projects, especially ones that are large and manpower intensive. The bottom line is that every job is easier when you delegate properly.

So, you like the idea of delegating, but you are so used to doing everything yourself that you don’t know where to begin. Here are some tips on how to delegate effectively:

### **1. Establish and maintain an environment that is favorable to delegating.**

This begins by creating team spirit. As an officer, you should clearly understand the task that you are delegating. If it is not clear in your own mind, you will not be able to communicate it to others. Take into consideration your expected result, the resources available to you, and the timeline in which the task needs to be accomplished.

Only when you fully understand what needs to be done, will you be able to brief the firefighter(s) thoroughly. When delegating assignments, be prepared to express the scope of the task, the desired results, the available resources, the sensitivity of the task, communication guidelines, deadlines, and of course your confidence in the person you select.

Once you have it all figured out, you’re ready to delegate; however, don’t lose sight of the fact that when you delegate, you are not relinquishing responsibility. As the officer, you are still in control of the overall project.

### **2. Select the right person for the job.**

When I first took over my shift, I went around to each station, stood in front of the firefighters who worked there, and asked each of them to share a little about themselves, specifically, what skills they may have that could assist us on the fire scene or around the firehouse. We all learned things about each other that day. Some firefighters were licensed electricians and/or contractors, others had computer skills. One was a member of the state’s urban search and rescue team. Having this knowledge made it easy for me to call on the right person for the right job.

When delegating, assure that the person accepting the assignment understands that by accomplishing the task, they will benefit the team, as well as themselves. A smart fire officer will be aware of the strengths and limitations of their company and delegate accordingly. Ideally, the person chosen to tackle a task should have the talent, skills, ability, knowledge, enthusiasm and time needed to get the job done. If you cannot find those qualities in one person, before selecting a delegate, ask questions like:

- Who is best equipped to handle this job?
- Who accepts challenges and is likely to rise to the occasion?
- Can one person do this job, or will it require multiple team members?
- Does the task require previous experience or is training needed?
- Who would learn the most by accepting this responsibility?
- Who would benefit the least if assigned this task?
- Who can I trust to do the job?

### **3. Assure the person accepting the assignment understands the assignment.**

When giving the assignment, encourage the delegate to ask questions in order to eliminate any confusion. Also be sure to express how much authority you are handing over. You may choose to provide guidance by saying something like, “Look into the problem; suggest a few possible solutions; and together we’ll choose the best one.” Or, you may have enough confidence in that individual to say, “Solve the problem and let me know when you’re finished.”

Be flexible, but set parameters and establish controls to ensure this authority and the accompanying power will be properly used. If necessary, inform other relevant firefighters of the situation. The person you are delegating the task to should not only have a clear picture of what you want, they should also be aware that by accepting the assignment, they are taking a positive step forward in their own progress as a competent and valuable firefighter.

### **4. Keep an open door policy.**

The lines of communication should always remain open. Make yourself available to provide assistance if and when needed. Let the delegate know he or she should make first contact but ask that person to immediately inform you when things are not going according to plan.

If the task or project is one that will take several days, weeks or even months to accomplish, schedule regular meetings just so you can acquire progress reports to make sure this project is moving forward, along with others that you may be working on. These meetings\* do not need to be more than a couple minutes long. Your main focus is to find out what has been accomplished, what needs to be accomplished, and what problems, if any, have been encountered.



*\*Go to FireOpsOnline for an article on ‘Conducting effective meetings.’*

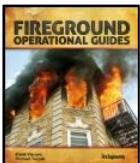
**5. Be prepared to accept and deal with the consequences of that person's actions if they do not meet your Department's expectations.**

It is important that every firefighter knows you have their backs when things unexpectedly go wrong; however, this does not mean that you have to accept less than their best effort. It simply means that when honest mistakes are made, you will approach the situation with a level head and take into consideration the fact that you assigned this task to this individual because you felt he or she was competent. An unsatisfactory outcome could be a result of situations that were out of the delegate's control. Since you delegated the assignment to a firefighter you have confidence in, that individual absolutely deserves the benefit of the doubt.

**6. Always, reward performance.**

Reward and recognition are vitally important when it comes to expressing appreciation. As I worked my way through the ranks, I've experienced and observed the reality that the people who work the hardest are often those who feel the most appreciated. As a fire officer (and team leader) it's your responsibility to show appreciation of a job well done by recognizing quality work privately and publicly. Sincere recognition will increase your effectiveness as a leader and keep team morale high. Don't reward hard working crew members by giving them more work than you give to others. Although that is a sign of respect for a competent individual, it is also poor management to put so much work on one person's shoulders that you fail to help develop the skills of others on the team. Consciously work to empower others in a way that they help you develop and execute your ideas and you will become a thousand times more efficient than you would by doing it yourself.

Fireproof Tip: The purpose of delegating is not to avoid work or unload difficult or tedious tasks to others. Effective delegation is an absolute necessity when it comes to a team's success. When you divide tasks, you multiply your chances of success. Failure to delegate will result in a failure to adequately develop your team. Through delegation, your team will grow in confidence; and they – and your entire department – will benefit in the long run.



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