Delegation lies at the heart of both effective leadership and effective organizations. “Can delegate effectively” appears in almost every assessment of managerial competence that I have seen in the last 20 years. And delegation consistently gets the lowest scores. There are many reasons, of course – lack of time, fear of losing control, lack of trust in subordinates – but also lack of understanding what effective delegation really means or involves. All are poor excuses when weighed against the benefits of enhanced performance and the time and resources that effective delegation frees up.

Defining the principles of delegation, empowerment and high performance is straightforward; what is often missing is the means to apply them, a practical tool rather than vague concepts. I offer a process of delegation that addresses this concern. As well as clearly defining a task, this communication process can be used to inspire and encourage, to bring the right leadership to a situation, and to build strong relationships between a manager and his direct reports. It is a process that draws together threads from psychology and leadership, but it is built around a way of working that I experienced in the military, perhaps the fastest-changing and most hostile working environment of any organization. It can be used with individuals, within a team or throughout an organization to enhance efficiency and performance.

Empowering effectively
An effective delegation process can help a leader move an individual or a team from dependence, requiring close supervision, to a state of empowerment. In fact, “empowerment” has become a catchword often used either as an excuse for the abdication of responsibility or in the hope that people will make things happen on their own.
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The principles
My setting direction model weaves together a number of threads. First, it reflects the principles I have described – clarity of purpose, an approach requiring disciplined application by all involved, and the acknowledgement of the importance of development and leadership in this process of delegation. Second, it draws on a practical communication process that has been used for many years in the most testing of environments. And, finally, it embraces four important principles that I believe underpin an effective delegation process:

The first is to establish mutual responsibility, not just for the outcome, but also for the process. In setting direction, the clarity of outcome and expectations, and the asking and answering of all the right questions, is a shared responsibility. The education of your team in this principle is vital for effective delegation.

The second is to make it visual. We know from modern neuroscience that the majority of people think visually – linking experiences, ideas and thoughts to pictures in their minds. The setting direction model uses visual aids to bring clarity, and they should be on the table in front of both parties.

The third is to engage in dialogue. In the German Army before 1945, there was an expression “an order is a vehicle for discussion” (yes, another blow to the stereotype of military leadership). The “order”
is actually the communication vehicle, the end product of a rigorous planning process, but commitment as well as clarity is important. Dialogue, with the genuine exchange of ideas, concerns and information, brings ownership, understanding and an enhanced plan. All of this must fit within the wider framework set by the principles of common philosophy and discipline; there has to be an end to dialogue and an understanding that once the dialogue is over, the plan is set.

The fourth is to deploy a continuous process. The Army does not confuse the importance and role of the planning process with the plan itself. Eisenhower captured this nicely with the expression “plans are useless; planning is everything”. The planning process and the communication of the essentials of a situation enable the right actions to be taken as the situation unfolds. Delegation does not mean an absence of control or responsibility, although it is the fear of such an occurrence and the reliance on trust or hope, as I see it, that prevent many senior managers from delegating. The process must enable direction and support to be adjusted as the project or task unfolds.

The process
The setting direction model provides a map, or visual display, for the delegation process. It also provides a checklist of information that needs to be exchanged as well as questions asked and answered when a task is delegated. It is a guide; the
The maturity of the relationship, the experience of both parties and the nature of the situation will dictate how much information is required in each step to bring the clarity that is required. There is, though, a reason for each step:

Defining the situation explains the big picture and the context for a task. It gives an understanding of why one is being asked to do something; this is important for three reasons. Efficiency and creativity I will talk more of later, but the most important reason is that it gives meaning and purpose to the work. To give a sense of purpose to our work is one of the great gifts that a leader can give; it awakens the soul and raises the spirit.

Creativity, flexibility and initiative are highly prized in the Army; in fact, they are vital for success in such a dynamic environment, yet they need to be channelled towards an overall goal and not allowed to degenerate into chaos and confusion. This requires both direction and boundaries.

The aim provides direction and boundaries; it answers the questions of what, why and when. The “what” and “when” are generally well understood, the “why” less so. The famous general Erwin Rommel introduced what became known as the Rommel Clause “in order to” as part of his delegation process. I have talked about the motivational value of understanding the purpose of a task, but knowing the commander’s intention enables individuals to find better ways, beyond their initial remit or arising from changing circumstances, to achieve a goal. So important is the aim – and the why – that in the army, it is always repeated to ensure understanding. If people are fully engaged in this process and have the resources, skills and encouragement, the aim is vital; the rest is channelling the energy in the right direction.

Managing the project deals with the specifics of the job to be done or the goal to be achieved, and the level of detail can be varied according to the experience of the person or team being delegated to. Each sub-task can follow the same format if appropriate, but there is an additional checklist to ensure that the individual or team has the resources to achieve the task. Again, the principle of mutual responsibility demands that both sides check that these questions have been asked and answered.

Engaging in continuous review keeps one current. I was taught “no plan survives the first contact of battle”. Yet, how often are individuals, teams or whole organizations held to account for goals and plans that are outdated or no longer relevant almost as soon as they are made? The review enables changes to be made, and it also provides a valuable forum for both sides of the relationship. For the manager, it provides a check on performance and an opportunity to give coaching, direction and encouragement. It removes uncertainty, moving relationships to a higher degree of trust. The details of the ongoing review must be in place.
Shaping the role of the leader encourages a conversation about, and agreement on the role of, the leader during the task. This may change from close monitoring, to coaching and team facilitation, to more of a consultancy role depending on the nature and length of the project and the experience and performance of the individual or team. The model draws on the concept of situational leadership – adapting the role of the leader to the changing needs of the people and the situation. Again, there is a mutual responsibility to get the “distance” right; more or less direction or support can be asked for or given. It is the recognition that delegation is a continuous process that enables trust to develop, created through open communication and a growing knowledge of each other. It is also the recognition that empowerment or delegation does not mean that the leader is giving up responsibility or control – the “fear” that is often the reason senior managers find delegation difficult. In this process, the leader is always responsible for setting the direction and the boundaries. The process provides a mechanism for moving those boundaries farther or closer depending on the situation and the people involved.

Important principles
It is easy to talk of principles and great concepts, such as empowerment and trust. Making them happen requires a clear, disciplined process of communication. The setting direction model of delegation has been tested in the most hostile and fast-moving “business” environment in the world and enables a high degree of confidence on both sides of the communication process. It can be applied at every level of an organization; widely applied, it can lead to a more empowered organization as efficiency and trust build over time. It is not a quick and easy fix; the principles that underpin it – a common philosophy, mutual responsibility, training and discipline – require an investment of time and energy. But even if only one manager applies it, performance and morale will be improved.

The process is built on a number of important principles, but it is much more; it is a vehicle for managers to inspire with a sense of purpose and to encourage individuals not only to achieve a goal but also to grow in skill and confidence. It enables building meaningful trust based on clear, open communication and performance over time rather than relying on hope. It enables both parties to set boundaries to encourage creativity and initiative but also provides an appropriate level of control. And finally, after the initial investment in time, it allows a manager to move from the role of supervision to inspiration and leadership.

Peter Danby (PJDanby@aol.co.uk) is an independent leadership tutor working with a range of organizations in the public and private sector. He has worked as an associate at London Business School since 1992.