



# Invest time in delegation

Many school business managers are reluctant to delegate work to their team but it is in fact essential for organisational success, as consultant **NICKII MESSER** explains

They say: 'If you want something done, ask a busy person' (Benjamin Franklin), but when I was a school business manager, asking a busy person to do even more proved a real challenge for me. How could I, in all conscience, add to the already over burdensome workload of the very people I was responsible for?

However difficult it may be for you, delegation is unquestionably the key to organisational success. Overreliance on any individual who keeps everything to themselves is an unacceptably risky practice. If you were not around (whether your absence were planned or not) who would do those tasks if only you understood them? Just as risky is the leader who expends unnecessary time and energy on tasks better delegated to others. That leader will have less time to spend on important leadership tasks and risks burning out trying to do everything.

The 'Educational Excellence Everywhere' white paper (DfE: 2016) sets out the government's intention to move every school into system-led, multi-academy trust formations. Nicky Morgan's rather diluted back-peddalling on this matter did little to reassure schools that they will have any choice. Increasingly reduced funding is likely to force the issue as schools will not be able to afford to work alone. SBMs need to carefully consider their position within this landscape, where the disappearance of LA support will mean more time being spent ensuring compliance, and the SBM role itself will necessarily become one of a more strategic nature across several schools and business management teams. Sustainability for the SBM role will be reliant on effective working practice, with delegation an intrinsic aspect.

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True, it can appear quicker to do the job yourself rather than spend time explaining it to someone else (who you are sure will never do it quite as well as you!). But rather than viewing it as spending time, regard it as investing time and effort in your team – which any good SBM should be doing as a matter of course. With that in mind, I have used the acronym INVEST as a framework for successful delegation.

**Identify**  
**Non-negotiables**  
**Value**  
**Entrust**  
**Ssh!**  
**Timescale**

Let me explain...

## Identify

Start delegation by identifying the tasks to be delegated. As a new SBM in a large secondary school, one of the first jobs my headteacher gave me was to buy fruit and cakes for the staff room on a Friday. Each Friday I went to the local supermarket and carefully selected the best value fruits and cake, taking pride in getting the best

deal and ringing the changes from week to week. One Friday my headteacher stood outside my office as I returned from shopping. 'Where on earth have you been?' she asked. When I explained that I went out each Friday to buy cakes and fruit, as directed by her, she was virtually speechless. 'When I ask you to do something, it doesn't mean that you have to do it, you just have to get it done!'

This was a sharp lesson that, as one of the school's senior leaders, I was expected to delegate. In practice this means identifying what needs doing, then deciding whether you have to do it. Those tasks that you don't have to do should, as far as possible, be delegated.

You will also need to identify who you are going to delegate to. This is not the time to be sensitive about workload. As an SBM you need to be professional, pragmatic and strategic. Choose the person best suited to the task and/or who you plan to develop. Provide them with any necessary support to be able to do the task and, if appropriate, help them prioritise their workload so that the delegated task/s can be successfully accommodated.

## Non-negotiables

Before handing over the task, be clear about the non-negotiables. What has to be done; when does it have to be done by and the minimum requirements to get the job done to an acceptable standard. I find that many school support staff are perfectionists and, of course, some jobs need to be done to an exact standard (financial returns, exam management etc). However, for many tasks, good enough has to be good enough. Schools can no longer afford to pay staff for 'over



production'. So an important but, for some, difficult non-negotiable will be the determining what is acceptable then leaving it at that. Delegation so often stalls because the delegator cannot bear to see someone doing a job at less than the very high standard that they would do themselves, so this may be a skill you need to develop.

### Value

An important lesson I learnt as an SBM was to value myself and my role. I quickly found that my week could be completely taken up by interruptions and 'could you just's' if I allowed it. Valuing the job that I was paid to do made it easier for me to be objective about prioritising and delegating tasks. This was not personal, it was about being the effective, quality SBM that my school needed me to be. Time spent on more administrative tasks takes you away from the strategic planning and systems and processes that you are paid to develop. Delegating becomes easier once you understand this.

You must also value your teams and the individuals within the teams. This means investing in them by delegating responsibility for the task, rather than just the operational aspects of the task. Don't worry, you can – normally should – retain accountability, but hand over the responsibility.

### Entrust

This brings us nicely to 'entrust'. The definition of delegation requires that you entrust the person you are delegating to. When you delegate, share with your colleague the non-negotiables only. You should not tell your colleague how to do the job or other superfluous information. If they are to grow and develop they will need to be entrusted with responsibility for how they get the task done. Until you feel more confident in them, give them



Be objective about prioritising

sufficient time to be able to learn and if there are specific technical skills that you can share with them, that's fine. An effective delegator asks how the colleague will do the job, and might also ask them to outline what they understand as the most important task elements to ensure that they really have understood them. But avoid, at all costs, standing over your colleague dictating how to do the task.

### Sshh

Ok, I know, I keep repeating it, but once you have delegated the task and the responsibility, you need to sshh! Leave your colleague alone and refrain from checking up on them. As long as you have an open door policy, and have built a culture of mutual trust, they should soon seek you out if they need help with anything.

### Timescale

It is important that you agree with your colleague the timescale for the task. The obvious point here is agreeing when the task needs to be done by, but there should be other elements of time built

in, especially with colleagues being asked to do something new to them. You might agree, for example, to meet in a few days' time so that you can both see how things are going and provide any extra support (with the task or prioritising other workload if that has become burdensome). This is a scheduled meeting rather than you just popping by to see how they are. It might also be wise to agree a deadline somewhat ahead of when completion is needed, so that any last minute hitches don't create a panic or impact on other stakeholders. For your colleague, missing a key deadline might be bad enough but if they feel that others have been impacted because of a mistake on their part, it can cause a real crisis of confidence. So a bit of leeway is good practice, and benefits everyone.

### Summary

When done properly, investing in delegation becomes empowering. Delegating tasks allows you to focus on the important, strategic, planning elements of your job that might otherwise take second place. As you are empowered to work more effectively, so the school and your colleagues benefit from the enhanced management and leadership you can devote more time to.

As with any skill, delegation is something that you can always continue to improve on. It is, therefore, worth investing time after the task has been completed to review how well you did, and how you can improve next time. Be brave and ask for 360 feedback too.

Delegation empowers colleagues to stretch out of their comfort zones, gaining confidence in new skills and experience. This supports sustainability within the organisation as it becomes less reliant on one or two individuals, with more opportunities for succession planning. Win, win! **n**

**i** Nickii Messer will be hosting a webinar on the art of delegation as part of our new SBM training series. To register, go to [my.optimus-education.com](http://my.optimus-education.com) and head to the webinars section