



Delegation

**What is the difference between delegation, suffocation, and abdication?
Are there Biblical guidelines for delegation? This article takes a closer
look at delegation from a Biblical perspective. We are reminded that the
Bible has much to say about how we organise, who we recruit, how we
delegate, and how we oversee what happens on the ground.**

*Prepared by - John Reed of Reposition Pty Ltd
E: john@reposition.net.au
M: +61 438 648 678 P: +61 2 9659 3221
A: 8 Mildara Place; West Pennant Hills; Sydney; NSW; 2125; Australia*

www.reposition-mindset.com.au

Delegation According to Jethro

“What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone.”

Jethro, circa 1350BC,

Exodus 18:14b, NIV

Joseph Patrick Tumulty, private secretary to President Woodrow Wilson from 1911 until 1921, wrote that “President Wilson did not have a well-organized secretarial staff, he did far too much of the work himself..... We all have a blind spot in some part of our eye. President Wilson’s was in his inability to use men.”

How very similar is Tumulty’s observation of Woodrow Wilson’s management approach in the early 1900s to Jethro’s observation of Moses management in about 1350BC! In each instance the observer recognised organisational dysfunction, and in each instance this dysfunction was attributed to the inability of the respective leaders to delegate.

How very different, though, was the effect of the two observations on the decisions that followed. Tumulty’s retrospective observation merely added to the memoirs on Woodrow Wilson and his work. In contrast, Jethro’s observation took place in the middle of Moses’ career, and added to Moses’ usefulness into the future.

We too have the opportunity to learn from Jethro’s advice to Moses!

DELEGATION OR DETERIORATION – WE HAVE A CHOICE!

Jethro’s message to Moses was dramatic! “What you are doing is not good” must have been a bitter pill for Moses to swallow, particularly as Moses was serving the people from ‘morning till evening’ (Exodus 18:13). Moses was surely the hardest working Hebrew in the camp, wholly committed to helping his people resolve their disputes by being their representative before God.

“You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out” (Exodus 18:14b, NIV) must have been even more difficult to hear, particularly when Moses was resolving many disputes to good effect. How tempting it must have been for Moses to reject Jethro’s gloomy outlook and to ignore Jethro’s observations and advice. It would have been easy for Moses to justify denial by lining up examples of people who had been helped through his counsel. How convincing it would have been for Moses to draw attention to the queues of people that demanded his time and his wisdom! How compelling to draw attention to God’s specific call upon his life and the numerous miracles that God had done through him!

We see, however, that “Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth” (Numbers 12:3, NIV). He was humble before God and humble before people. So when Jethro drew Moses’ attention to the queues, to the unresolved disputes, to the growing weariness and to the imminent collapse of this system, “Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said” (Exodus 18:24, NIV). He was sufficiently concerned about God’s purposes and his people to

stop long enough to consider Jethro's counsel and to respond appropriately.

What about us? Do we have humble hearts before God and towards those whom we lead? Are we sufficiently concerned about the delegated work we have received from God to want to grow our own delegation skills? How do we respond to difficult observations about our leadership? Do we recognise, accept, and implement sound advice?

This encounter between Jethro and Moses reminds us of just how much impact our responses to sound advice can have. Moses could have gone the route of denial, which would have resulted in deterioration as evidenced by Jethro's comment that "you will only wear yourselves out." Instead, Moses listened to and applied the principles of godly delegation which resulted in God's purpose advancing, the development of his people, and a deepening of Moses' understanding of management. It is no surprise that many writers consider Jethro to be the first known example of a management consultant, and his advice to be the foundation of all modern management theory.

The point I make here is that delegation was far more than a nice addition to Moses' leadership approach. Learning to apply the principles of godly delegation was critical for Moses at this point in his journey and from this time forward. Either Moses was to understand the principles of delegation and apply them to the benefit of all, or Moses would continue working without delegating to the great detriment of all. The choice before him in 1350 BC was delegation or deterioration! The choice before managers in the 21st century is still delegation or deterioration!

DELEGATION NEEDS DEFINITION – WHAT IS YOUR DEFINITION?

The concept of delegation has come to mean different things to different people. **Whilst we may use the same word, our explanations of what delegation means and the different manners in which we actually delegate demonstrate significant differences in understanding and practice.**

Ronald Reagan described delegation in practice in this way, "Surround yourself with the best people you can find, delegate authority, and don't interfere as long as the policy you've decided upon is being carried out." Theodore Roosevelt defined a good delegator when he said, "The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and self-restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they do it."

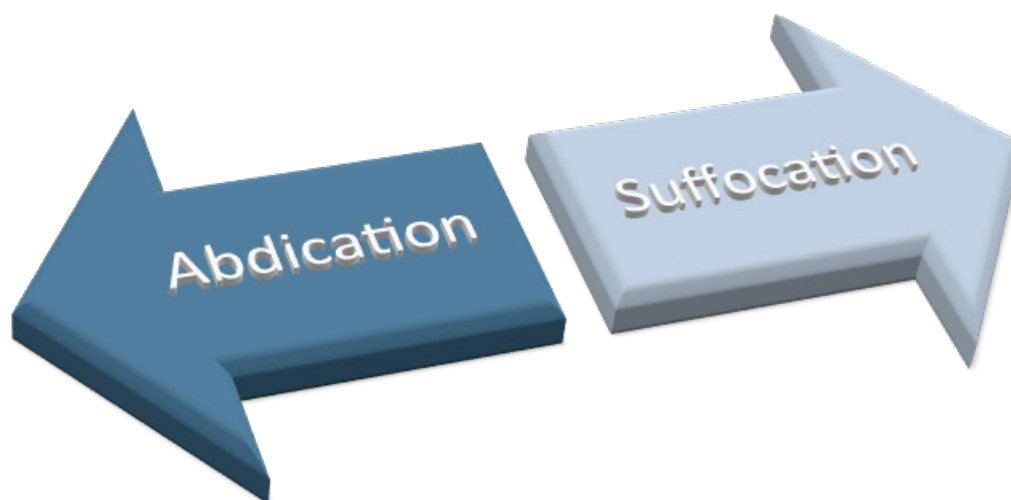
In each of these quotations we sense the impact of the life journey of the speaker and also the burden of responsibility that has prompted such deep reflection on an important matter. Their conclusions reflect the acquisition of learning over time and through many challenges. Indeed, there is much wisdom in each of Reagan's and Roosevelt's advice and we do well to consider their words. As was the case with these two prominent historical leaders, each of us develops our understanding of delegation during the course of our particular life experiences and our definition of delegation is refined through the school of hard knocks. This was certainly the case with Moses. It was most definitely my own experience and it will probably be your experience as well.

So what is your current definition of delegation? More importantly, how do you practice delegation, and is your practice consistent with your definition? My aim is to help readers think more deeply

about delegation in order to become more effective delegators under God to the benefit of all.

Let's start with a fairly typical definition of delegation in order to then take this further. **"Delegation is the entrustment by a party of work or responsibility and authority to another and the creation of accountability for performance"**. This is a particularly helpful definition due to its emphasis on the 'creation of accountability for performance,' for this is one of the most difficult aspects of effective delegation.

Let's build on this definition as we reflect on the following diagram, in order to get a deeper understanding of the essential aspects of effective delegation. The definition highlights the idea that delegation involves handing over responsibility and authority for a task to another whilst implicitly emphasising that the delegator remains accountable for the outcomes. **It is the tension between 'handing over' and retaining accountability for performance that makes effective delegation so difficult and so elusive. The following diagram helps us to understand why this is so.**



While most of us talk about 'delegation' as though we are referring to the same thing, every manager implements delegation in a different way. Notwithstanding these differences in practice, our approach to delegation can normally be positioned somewhere on the continuum between suffocation (micromanagement) and abdication. Where would you position your approach to and practice of delegation? Where would those who report to you position your approach to delegation?

For many, their practice of delegation would be more akin to abdication, evidenced by a failure to create accountability for performance. This could be described as a 'lazy' approach to delegation, where the hard yards of establishing the performance management framework around the delegate are never achieved. The driving concept in this practice is empowerment, yet the framework is far too loose to effectively empower the delegate. In reality, the delegate is 'empowered to fail'!

This happens far more frequently than we might expect. Abdication occurs at a board level when a board considers their role to be to select and support the CEO without sufficient rigour

related to the CEO's mandate and the related performance management process. It happens at a functional level where a CEO fails to establish clear functional roles, responsibilities, deliverables, and monitoring mechanisms. Similarly, abdication is often seen in the relationship between a manager and a direct report where there is a lack of clarity about the specific contribution the delegate is to make and how this will be demonstrated.

Abdication occurs when the delegator does not recognise that they retain accountability for the outcomes of the delegated work and the framework within which the tasks are carried out.

Abdication is characterised by ambiguity. The delegator hands over an assignment but fails to provide sufficient detail, scope, and expectations in order to enable the delegate to succeed. The delegate, be it an individual or a department, may feel empowered initially but reality sets in quickly as the delegate lacks specific direction and starts to feel unsupported or set up for failure. Over time even the Delegator starts to expect problems, and they usually get them.



When the practice of delegation is closer to abdication then one should expect the following outcomes:

- 1. Abdication will invariably come back to haunt the abdicator.**
- 2. Roles, responsibilities, deliverables, and performance are based on assumption.**
- 3. The delegator tends to deal mainly or even only with what they enjoy doing.**

The intended delegation will be ineffective, resulting in deterioration of morale and performance with ambiguous purpose.

Equally common is an attempt to practice delegation that is perceived more as 'suffocation' or micromanagement. Harry Chambers says the following, "Micromanagement is all about interference and disruption. It occurs when influence, involvement and interaction begin to subtract value from people and processes. It is the perception of inappropriate interference in someone else's activities, responsibilities, decision-making and authority."

Harry Chambers goes on to demonstrate the deterioration that results from micromanagement, as well as just how common micromanagement is. In the US Survey he conducted on the 'extent and impact of micromanagement,' he concluded that 80% of respondents claimed they had been mismanaged, and that 36% had changed jobs due to perceived micromanagement. Furthermore, 85% said that micromanagement adversely affected their morale. The study also found that few

managers were aware that they micromanaged employees, most managers were oblivious to the impact it had on employees, and about one-third of managers believed that it was how their organisations required them to manage.



Suffocation or micromanagement is typified by the following:

1. **Most micromanagers do not think of themselves as micromanagers.**
2. **People leave managers rather than companies.**
3. **Micromanagement is more accurately described as mismanagement.**

The intended delegation when practiced as micromanagement will be ineffective, resulting in deterioration in morale, engagement, and

If we return to our definition of delegation then, **the missing element for the micromanager is the failure to entrust responsibility and authority to another.** The preference is to interfere (and disrupt) along the way to the great detriment of the organisation and its people.

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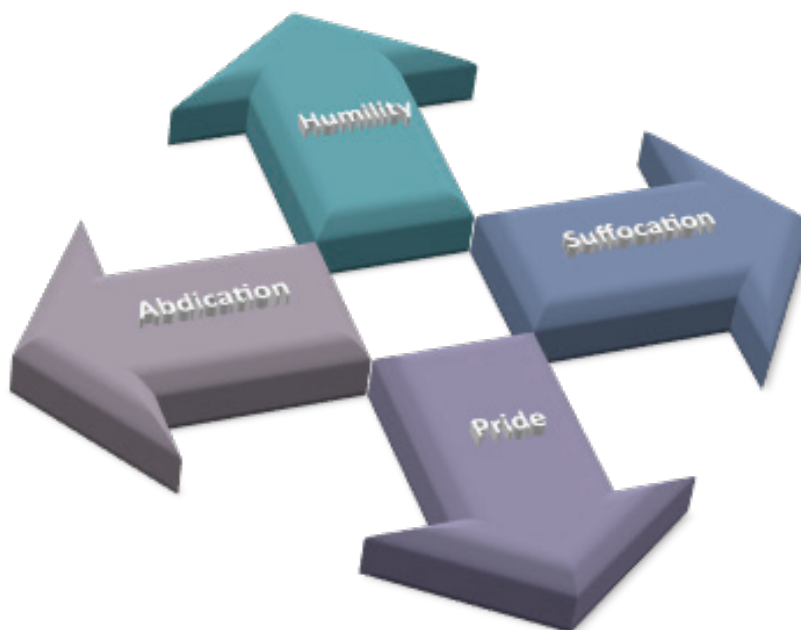
DELEGATION FROM A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Some time back I was in an audience listening to an address on servant leadership as demonstrated by Jesus. The speaker advocated that the servant leadership that Jesus exhibited should be implemented by all leaders because 'it works.' During question time an audience member asked the speaker how they would counsel someone who wanted to embrace the leadership model that Jesus exhibited because 'it works,' but did not want to embrace Jesus. A thought provoking question!

You may well ask how this story relates to delegation. Up to this point in this article, delegation has been considered on a horizontal level with a focus on how an effective delegator delegates. In other words the emphasis has been on the skill of delegation. What has not been considered is the importance of a delegator's recognition that he or she is firstly a delegate with a trust. Indeed, **if a leader is solely concerned with the skill of delegation and is unconcerned with the trust given**

to them by God then the leader is their own authority and delegation is just a management technique to get the most out of people. On the other hand, if the delegator is acutely conscious of the task they have been entrusted with by God, then delegation is an essential skill that progresses God's purposes in our teams, our organisations and our world.

Moses is of great help to us in this regard. **In Exodus 18 we have a record of a humble delegate who was a very weak delegator. His lack of skill was blatantly obvious to Jethro, but what was also abundantly clear to Jethro was that Moses was an exceptional delegate before God. Moses had a deep recognition of his specific trust as the people's representative before God,** and also of God's instruction that Moses teach them the Lord's decrees and shows them how to live (Exodus 18:19-20, paraphrased). God does much with a person who lacks skill but is humble before God! Are you and I conscious of the things that God has delegated to us? Are we persuaded about the specific task that God has given us to do? Moses was!



Earlier in this article I suggested that our understanding and practice of delegation lies somewhere between abdication and suffocation. By implication I suggested that the **skill of delegation is positioned somewhere in the middle of this continuum. Now I am suggesting that the skill of delegation is incomplete and of no lasting value without humility before God.** This is what the above diagram illustrates. A person may well be a very skilled delegator but if the person's authority starts with themselves then their concept of delegation starts with themselves. Leaders who fall into this category would do well to consider the merit of being humble before God in recognition that authentic delegation starts with recognising God's authority. On the other hand, a person may be an unskilled delegator but have a humble recognition of what God has entrusted to them. This describes Moses before he learnt the skill of delegation.

Now, imagine if the above diagram had a rectangle around it – where would you place your approach to and practice of delegation? How does this simple exercise help you?

Before moving on from this section, **let's remind ourselves of the breadth and depth of God's delegation to humanity generally and to those of us who trust Him in particular.** It is extraordinary that God says to humanity, "Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds" (Genesis 1:28, NIV). What a delegation! What provision! It is beyond comprehension that Jesus should delegate the task to "go and make disciples of all nationsteaching them to obey everything I have commanded you and surely I am with you always" (Mathew 28:19-20). What a delegation! What provision! It is also wonderful to consider His provision and equipping for life, for godliness, and for the specific good works that He has prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10, paraphrased). How is it that a God so great can entrust so much to failed humans? This is surely instructive for us as we consider and develop our approach to delegation.

DELEGATION IS DIFFICULT!

In the previous section I highlighted the importance of recognising that delegation starts with God. More specifically, true delegation starts with knowing what God has delegated to us to do. I now return to the skill of delegation. How do we delegate without abdicating? How do we delegate without suffocating? How do we delegate effectively?



The first point to make is that effective delegation is a learnt skill. Whereas neither abdication nor suffocation require much effort or practice, effective delegation is a skill that is hard-earned. It is acquired through experience, practice, the school of hard knocks, and the process of elimination. This was certainly true for Moses!

Let us remind ourselves of Jethro's words to Moses whilst Moses was working hard as God's delegate, "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out." (Exodus 18:14b).

Talk about learning through the process of elimination and the school of hard knocks! It was in the midst of intense difficulties and imminent collapse that Jethro helped a trustworthy delegate become an effective delegator.

How then did Jethro help Moses? What was the essence of Jethro's advice? How does this Biblical account help us as we try to be both trustworthy delegates and effective delegators? In response to these questions, let us take a closer look at aspects of Jethro's advice that reflected deep insight into God's purposes through Moses, and that evidenced extraordinary understanding of how these purposes get worked out practically.

Delegation Principle 1 – "You must be" - Jethro said to Moses, "Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him." (Exodus 18:20, NIV). The foundation of true delegation is humility

before God with an acknowledgement that all we are and have comes from Him, and that any right we have to delegate to others is given to us by God. The foundation of Jethro's advice to Moses was his confirmation and valuing of what God was doing through Moses. Jethro was in awe of what God had done and was doing for His people in and through Moses. Jethro evidenced wholehearted support for God's purposes and Moses' calling, but he helped Moses see that his method was 'not good' and that there would be dire consequences if this continued.

Delegation Principle 2 – “you cannot handle it alone ...” – These five words express deep truths about wise delegation. The more we recognise our need of God and others to help the closer we are to a mature understanding of authentic delegation. Whilst Moses was acutely aware of his need for God, the essential problem with Moses' leadership method was that he did not delegate. Moses was the sole representative between the people and God. He was separated geographically from his family and separated functionally from those with him. The people shared their difficulties with him but not his workload. Moses had established this unsatisfactory situation through his own approach to executing God's purposes.

Delegation Skill 1 – “But select ...” – The word delegation implies getting work done through others which means that selection is inextricably tied to delegation.



Jethro's counsel was to:

- 1. Select people who whose character was aligned to the purpose of the organisation.**
- 2. Select people whose competencies matched the specific task.**
- 3. Select people who could be trusted to reliably execute their task.**

Failure to select as advised would accentuate Moses' sense of being alone, causing more work for Moses with increased dissatisfaction for all.

Delegation Skill 2 – “and appoint them as officials over” – Selection must be for a specific purpose. It may well be that the most common cause for delegation failure is a sloppy definition of the delegated roles and responsibilities. ‘Appointments’ require thoughtful planning that takes into account the organisation's purpose, strategies, business plans, and the particular ‘problem’ that delegation must solve. This work is often left undone, and this results in role ambiguity to the detriment of all.



Jethro's counsel was to:

- 1. Set up a sensible structure that facilitated an effective organisation.**
- 2. Be very clear about roles and responsibilities and the specific tasks that have been delegated.**
- 3. Be very clear about the scope of authority that the delegates were given.**

Delegation Skill 3 – “But have them bring every difficult case to you ...” – When roles and responsibilities are ambiguous, one can be very sure that the oversight framework is inadequate. Indeed, how can there be a robust oversight framework when it is not clear what has been delegated and what the intended outcomes are? Jethro recognised the need for clear appointment with effective oversight. His method meant that the delegates were both empowered to resolve disputes under God and accountable for ensuring that both simple and difficult matters were dealt with.



Jethro's counsel was to:

- 1. Be very clear about the intended outcomes from delegation.**
- 2. Ensure that both the delegator and the delegate are accountable for results.**
- 3. Ensure the outcomes evidence that the problem had been solved.**

The intention was to resolve more disputes quicker by sharing the load so everyone could bear the strain. Progress was assessed against these pre-determined outcomes.

DELEGATION IS DELIBERATE!

Sound advice is one thing, but the only thing that really counts is what we do in response to such advice!

“Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said” (Exodus 18, NIV). **The narrative goes on to record how Moses implemented each and every aspect of Jethro’s advice, thereby establishing a robust delegation framework that resulted in more disputes being resolved quicker, with less strain and with more satisfied people.** In all of this God’s purposes were progressed. What an outcome! What a transformation from a willing, hard-working delegate but weak delegator to a willing delegate who became a well organised and effective delegator!

What can we ‘listen to’ and ‘do’ as we reflect on Jethro’s advice to Moses? What outcomes will be achieved from listening and doing? How will God’s purposes, our organisations, and all involved be helped by applying the lessons that Moses learnt?

DELEGATION OR DETERIORATION – WE HAVE A CHOICE!



I end this article where I started, suggesting that we can wear ourselves and our people out, to the detriment of God’s purposes and all stakeholders, or we can humbly develop our understanding of and our practice of godly delegation.

What would the outcome have been if Moses had denied Jethro’s observations and rejected his advice?

What impact would this have had on God’s purposes, on the people he was entrusted with, on Moses himself and on history? Thankfully God makes much of trustworthy delegates, providing help just when it is needed most.

What about us? Are we wearing ourselves and our people out? Are we abdicating or suffocating when we need to be delegating? Are there a growing number of unresolved problems? Are bottlenecks being addressed? Are stakeholders engaged or disengaged? Are your departments and your people connected to the purpose of your organisation? Is God’s stamp on the purpose of your organisation? Are the roles and responsibilities well formulated? Do each function and each person know how they contribute to the whole?

These are useful questions. We do well to ask them and to apply ourselves to being a trustworthy delegate and an effective delegator under God. I trust this article will provide you with wholesome ‘food for thought’ as you strive to take good care of that which God has entrusted to you.

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