

Principles of Delegation of Authority and Responsibility in A Highway Department

K. L. BERGSTRALH, Director of Personnel, Minnesota Highway Department

● MOST administrators know the fundamental principles pertaining to delegating tasks from a superior to one or more subordinates. In fact, they are quick to criticize each other for failures to delegate, but proportionately reluctant and slow to apply the principles to their own cases. Lip service is paid to the laws of cause and effect as they apply to the area of delegation, and simultaneously aid and support are given to the enemy—bottlenecks, delays, missed deadlines, overtime, turnover, poor morale and inefficiency. The principles are preached for and acted against.

For example, all must install assistant positions—assistant chief engineers, assistant district engineers, etc.—because of the increased workload. Invariably these new assistants assume some duties and responsibilities formerly assigned to their subordinates, yet presumably the new assistant should relieve his division head without usurping functions that have already been delegated to section chiefs. Nevertheless, in writing the job specifications and the budgetary justification, even professional personnel people tend to fill out the page with statements whose leading words are "reviews, checks, and authorizes, recommends, directs and executes." These words and phrases are fine insofar as they reflect tasks that were formerly performed by the division head and will in the future be performed by the assistant. On the other hand, they often represent tasks formerly performed by the section chiefs but now to be performed at a higher level simply to justify installation of a new position. In other cases they represent an intermediate, additional review or check before the division head takes action. The division head receives some relief in these instances in that his review need only be cursory in the future, but the section chiefs usually experience additional delays and new production problems.

The first principle should be to guard against reversing the flow of authority and responsibility downward simply to justify a new top level position. The simple job description, "to relieve the division head by supervising and coordinating several sections" would be far more in keeping with the purpose of the new post than a long detailed description that usurps some of the duties that have already been effectively delegated to a lower level.

Secondly, priority of importance should be given to items to be delegated or retained. Division heads often will delegate authority to add or delete positions to someone quite removed from their offices and thereby grant authority to a subordinate to gradually modify their organizations. This may improve or destroy the organization, but the importance rating seems to be low. Yet they will retain for their personal review the responsibility of checking telephone and light bills, small purchase requisitions, and the like. This is an absurd example, but even it can be found.

Certain functions ought not to be delegated by a division or district head: authority to determine policy, for example, or to modify the organization of the division by adding or deleting positions or by shifting phases of the divisional operations from one section to another. The division head should personally act on major conflicts between divisions, and should represent the division in meetings with higher authority whenever possible. On the other hand, the division head should assign to his subordinates the authority they need to make final decisions within the framework of established policy and he should hold them to making those decisions. He should be free to act quickly when emergencies develop without delaying the non-affected units. He should not tie himself down to answering daily correspondence or even reviewing a large percentage of the replies to that correspondence. His subordinates should be so well informed on his policies and thinking that they will call only the unusual items to his attention, and then only with formulated replies. He should review purchase requisitions only when something new and extraordinary is contemplated. He should be well posted on the pro-

gress of his program, but on the details only when they constitute a significant threat to the smooth flow of the work.

If the division head has an assistant, the assistant should most certainly be able to reflect the thinking of his chief to such an extent that he can accurately predict the course of action his chief will take in almost any situation. If he is to be of value, he should act on the basis of his predictions and his chief should insist that he take such action. To create a situation where intermediate management or other departmental officers must obtain the review and approval of both the assistant and the head of the division on a large percentage of problems is to create a small committee. The division head post was created to organize and direct a group of persons toward the accomplishment of a defined function or group of functions. Too often the person appointed to this post serves as though he were a committee chairman, particularly when he insists upon signing a mass of documents and correspondence himself and then only after written concurrence on the part of a series of subordinates.

Skipping from the division head to the first line of supervision, most departments have technicians who supervise several clerks or engineering aides organized into units. These technicians are held responsible for the development of certain information, for checking, coding, and tabulating, and for writing reports. They are not only held responsible for the production of their subordinates, but, in the interest of efficiency, for producing almost eight hours of detailed work personally as well. Further, the tools of discipline usually rest with higher authority, often centralized authority. These tools (merit increases, promotional ratings, promotions, disciplinary powers, etc.) have been taken away from these first-line supervisors and given to intermediate or top level supervisors, personnel officers, and even central agencies and legislative bodies. These technicians are responsible for producing given units of work, have crews to assist them, but no disciplinary tools, no supervisory training, and no time to supervise. If these technicians are given the opportunity to do the jobs described to them when they accepted the positions, a basis will have been established for proper delegation of authority and responsibility throughout the department. They should be permitted to spend their time training subordinates to their highest level of skill, to listen to and properly appraise their suggestions, to develop simplified forms and procedures, and to periodically check into the values and use of each report: in short, to supervise. If they are permitted to do these things, they will be ready for more work from above and their superiors will be most willing to delegate additional tasks.

Consideration should next be given to that layer of supervisory personnel that exists between the technicians and the division heads. This layer can act as a floating, horizontal iron curtain or as a human chain of efficient communication between division heads and technicians. They filter the items of communication that pass from top to bottom and from bottom to top, and the nature of the filtration process can promote or destroy morale and production. Oddly enough, if this intermediate level is made up of people who delegate well, it is usually true that they communicate accurately and with good judgment. Only through failure to delegate can they afford to withhold information.

There are several methods of getting these people to delegate. The first step for the division head to section chief is to himself assign downward tasks, responsibilities and authority on items that he feels he would really like to handle personally—if he had sufficient time. With the house clean at the top, the housecleaning can get started in the middle. Next, the middle-man should be literally swamped; given so much to do with close deadlines that he is forced to use subordinates for decision making. Third, the valve should be closed on him if he starts bringing the work back undone, if he brings up questions that he himself or even his subordinates should answer. He should be required firmly and tactfully to do his job thoroughly and promptly, with assistance on policy questions only, and supervise only through brief, pointed personal conferences and memoranda. His supervisor is responsible for insuring that he is training his subordinates for promotion by farming out difficult phases of the program to them and, in turn, holding them responsible for making sound decisions within the framework of established policy. Finally, one must have patience when the system breaks down occasionally, when errors are made—they are all part of the training process.

Reference has been made to those who bring incomplete work back to the superior.

This is simple, upward, "buck passing". It is often practiced and frequently encouraged. When subordinates are permitted to submit recommendations based on incomplete data or analysis simply for the purpose of bucking the problem to higher authority for solution, they are being encouraged to avoid their responsibilities. These people really want authority to act on the obvious and a quick escape for the difficult. Most of them have the mental capacity to gather the data, eliminate the indifferent and non-decisive factors, weight the inescapable evidence, and come to logical conclusions. By applying themselves, most subordinates can filter the stream that flows up the pipeline to the top. If they carry out their tasks properly, the final trickle should be clear and pure, completely purified of all but the policy questions.

Practically all are guilty of allowing distasteful tasks to pass by their posts to be resolved by superiors. There are times when the central office can more easily "take the heat" for a distasteful decision, but normally even the distasteful can be digested more readily if seasoned with honesty, candidness, and forthrightness. How many first-line supervisors will flunk a subordinate on a promotional examination? How many second-, third-, or fourth-line supervisors can rate the candidate as honestly and candidly as the first-line supervisor? Is it better for the central office to tell a field man that he has failed to earn a salary increase than for the field chief to give him the news? Who is in the best position to bring a crew into line, the party chief or the district engineer? If overtime work has been authorized over a period of time, and the employees have come to depend on overtime checks as a regular source of income, and if the need for overtime has ceased to exist, who will call it off? These are elementary questions. Everyone can think of others common in his own organization. On the other hand, if one works out his own answers logically and thoroughly, he can expect fast action when approvals are necessary. In fact, a consistent record of well-developed answers and actions invariably leads to delegation of final authority and responsibility in the area concerned.

This business of buck passing upwards is not common to individuals alone. The author has been a member of various committees where similar action was recommended. Committees are established to study specific problems and recommend solutions. The authority that selects and appoints a committee does so to obtain the answer to a plaguing question, and certainly has every reason to believe that the committee will work on the problem until it comes up with the answer. Yet many committees contain one or more members who quickly make a motion to provide the appointing authority with all the data that have been assembled, let him analyze that data and develop the policy or program himself. If the committee seems to deadlock on an issue, there most certainly will be an early recommendation and some support to dump the entire mess in the lap of the person who appointed the committee.

Both individuals and committees ought to consult with their supervisors from time to time, but far too many are prone to wait for the supervisor to do all the thinking. The practice can be habit forming.

Earlier, reference was made to unnecessary checks and reviews. Obvious as it may seem, unnecessary proofing, checking and double-checking is totally non-productive. In fact, it is less than non-productive, it reduces the total output. Men assigned to unnecessary work would be more profitable to the department if permitted to stay home on full salary. Yet everyone can uncover positions in his organization that are justified largely on the basis of fruitless double-checking and reviewing. Experience has proven time and again that errors will continue to flow to the reviewing officer if the originator of the work knows that they will be caught and corrected. Somehow, the original production is much more apt to be accurate if the producer knows that the work will only be spotchecked or not checked at all. It is not intended here that all checking and reviewing should be eliminated, but it does seem that graduate engineers and highly trained and paid technicians ought to be able to work without someone proofing for "dotted i's and crossed t's." They certainly should be able to prepare transmittal letters without subsequent review. If truth is recognized, these technicians and graduates are paid sufficiently to marry and raise families. If they can assume full and final responsibility for a wife and children, for appraising and purchasing a home worth upwards of \$15,000, for signing deeds, mortgages and long-term installment contracts,

they can be expected to assume comparable responsibility on the job. The supervisor should sign letters and requests occasionally without reading them. He will be amazed at how quickly these subordinates can perfect their grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, etc.

It is not intended to belabor the point, but most supervisors tediously review masses of routine papers and documents looking for errors. This is done because they want to avoid the embarrassment and "needling" that follows careless errors. It would seem more profitable to devote this time to training subordinates to perform the work accurately and to take the "needling" with good humor. If they continue to check for minor errors, the overwhelming error of delay, and of failure to foresee threatening difficulties and to prepare plans and programs in advance, will rise as a black cloud of inefficiency over their own desks.

It has previously been noted that lip service is paid to the principles of delegation. To be frank, however these very principles are unconsciously but insidiously undermined. For instance, division heads often insist on clearing with fellow division heads only, and vice versa. Pride seem to dictate that even simple bits of information that must be obtained by one division head from a unit in another division be obtained through direct contact with the head of that division. The secretary may be as well informed on the subject and perhaps even give faster service, but instead the fellow employee at the top is disturbed. Certainly, when one division head delegates final authority for a specified but continuing task to a subordinate, fellow division heads ought to respect that delegation. Nevertheless, "I wish you would handle this one personally," is a popular opening phrase.

Another example of undermining is sometimes rampant—that of going over another man's head. Personnel people are probably more often guilty than anyone else in this respect. Why should an employee be permitted to bypass his supervisor and take up the question of a raise, a promotion, or a grievance with the personnel office first? The personnel office should rightfully be contacted directly on personal problems, and on matters where the supervisor might be intimately involved. On the other hand, the supervisor should have the right and the privilege of the first try at settling a grievance that is confined to his unit. The same is true of other matters. Few actions can be so disturbing as to learn, after carefully listening to and considering a proposal, that the matter was taken up with the boss and he approved it. Subsequent contacts take on a different tone, for a time at least.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The principles of delegation that have been set forth herein can be summarized as follows:

1. Once authority and responsibility have been effectively and successfully delegated, avoid reassigning them upwards in the organization. Temptation often comes when new top level positions are to be established.
2. Establish a system of priority of importance and delegate accordingly. Avoid retaining the short-term items and delegating those that occur infrequently, but over the long term may have a very serious effect on the organization.
3. Close the valve against reverses in the downward flow of authority. Force subordinates to make decisions on matters that have been delegated to them.
4. When serving on a committee, force the committee to develop a final conclusion and recommendation.
5. Make it possible for supervisors to supervise. Unit chiefs overloaded with paper volumes cannot effectively manage a crew of workers.
6. Force the intermediate supervisors to delegate; give them the subordinate forces they need, swamp them with work, and insist that they conclude it within the framework of established policy.
7. Re-evaluate the position of the assistant division head and assistant district engineer. These people should be in a position to act on the basis of their intimate knowledge of how the top man would act without necessarily consulting him.
8. Delete and guard against unnecessary reviews and checks. They can be exceed-

ingly costly in time, salary, morale, employee development, and production.

9. Guard against personal guilt of passing the buck upwards. Relieve your own chief by resolving some of his problems that pass your way.

10. Honor rather than undermine the principles of delegation.

As to the future, the young graduate engineers and other technicians will inescapably become the department of tomorrow, and time passes quickly. These young men will, in a very short span of time, be appointed to positions in the intermediate and upper echelons of supervision and management. Each of these men now direct small crews of technicians, and will direct successively larger crews of technicians and engineers. The work habits they adopt now will more or less determine their relative promotability in the future. The work habits they instill in their current subordinates will be passed on to new technicians as they are hired and trained through the years. In other words, if the current chief of a survey party indulges in delays in getting started in the morning, frequent and lengthy coffee and lunch breaks, and an early quitting time in the evening, he will find it practically impossible to break these crews of such habits when he himself becomes dependent upon their production to meet the schedules he establishes from a higher position of authority in the future. Similarly, if he accepts little responsibility for directing the crew now, his replacement will follow his pattern in the future. To the contrary, if this young graduate directs the crew in a firm, responsible, human, and productive manner, his replacement will likely follow in his footsteps. If he is educated in the principles of delegation and becomes accustomed to their application, he can remodel the entire department, whose people are often better trained than their predecessors.

During preparation of this paper, the author had an opportunity to review a manual prepared by the American Association of State Highway Users and the National Highway Users' Conference of November, 1957. This manual contains an outstanding article on delegation of authority and responsibility, a reprint of "Good Management Men Delegate Authority," by John Gorsuch, published in *Advanced Management* for September, 1954. It is recommended for careful study and application, as repetition of any of the information available in that article has been avoided in the current paper.