



Assigning Work, Delegating, and Getting Things Done

To delegate is, literally, “to entrust.” Delegation is fundamentally tied to first-line supervision in two ways. Growers or upper-level managers delegate to supervisors, and supervisors, in turn, delegate to operational workers.

What gets delegated? To the supervisor, it is his or her responsibility to achieve results through the use of resources and judgment. From the supervisor, usually physical tasks are delegated. In general, the higher the position is in the organization, the broader the judgment expected and the fewer the operational duties. Agricultural supervisors typically have a mixture of some doing and much decision making, including discretion about what to do and what to delegate.

Delegation is absolutely necessary because the volume and range of work that has to be done are large. One person cannot do it all, and the mix of work to be performed in agricultural operations normally requires a variety of abilities that one person simply does not possess. In the short term, delegation helps accomplish necessary tasks; moreover, it also serves a long-term business purpose by developing abilities within the workforce and giving employees the chance to grow. In building staff capacity, delegation also allows for flexibility in the operation, provides a form of training, prepares people for more responsible jobs, and reduces the expense of recruiting from the outside.

Why Not Delegate

Occasionally, the process of delegation breaks down in application. First-line supervisors’ participation in production tasks and their lending a hand when needed can benefit the ranch business and employees in various ways. Yet many supervisors and other managers do their businesses a great disservice by over-involving themselves in operational work. Consider the following case of the busy supervisor at Blue Boulder Farms:

A foreman has to do, to manage, and to decide when for each.



The Busy Supervisor at Blue Boulder Farms

Luis Rojas has worked at Blue Boulder Farms (BBF) for 12 years. He began as a tractor driver, moved to the shop, developed a reputation as a terrific mechanic and then was promoted again. Currently Luis is one of four ranch supervisors at BBF.

The whole operation contains 5,000 acres of asparagus, tomatoes, seed alfalfa, sugar beets, safflower, and barley, divided into four ranches. While Steve Wilson, a general manager, oversees all parts of the business and is available on site, each supervisor is in charge of activities and personnel on one respective ranch. During the past few years, the crop mix has been similar, though not identical, across all four ranches.

The other three supervisors, Ed Mamer, Jack Encina, and Max Farley, have been with the company an average of 10 years. Steve feels the performance of these three has been fine in every respect but that Luis does not run a tight enough ship. Things seem to be getting worse.

Last month, for example, while driving through ranch #4 (the one that Luis is responsible for), the manager stopped to talk to a worker who was supposed to be side dressing sugar beets. The man was leaning on his tractor, apparently waiting for something. When questioned, he said that he was waiting for the boss to bring him more fertilizer. Steve went to the equipment area, found Luis working on the carburetor of an irrigator's pickup, and asked what was going on. Luis said that he had already put the fertilizer in his truck and would get it out to the tractor driver in just a few minutes. When Steve drove through the field nearly an hour later, the worker was sitting and still waiting for his fertilizer.

Two weeks ago, Steve was talking to a fertilizer salesman in the equipment yard. Seeing a tractor driver filling a mounted fertilizer tank with water, the salesman asked exactly what material he was diluting. The manager did not know, so he went over to ask the driver, who said that he didn't know either. It turned out that he was not applying any product at all. Luis himself had dumped in the first batch of fertilizer before water was added, but he did not come back to do the second or this third batch. He had been delayed doing some emergency welding for Max Farley on ranch #3.

Yesterday the fan belt broke on Steve's pickup while he was on ranch #4. He had a replacement but needed a wrench to put it in. When he walked into the nearby shop area to get one, he found a mechanic making unwelcome advances on the new bookkeeper, who was trying to conduct a parts inventory. She hurried out. After installing the new fan belt, the manager went to look for Luis and found him out in the field tearing into a tractor engine while the driver stood by.

Steve asked Luis to call him on the radio as soon as he was finished. They arranged to have a meeting that day because the manager was concerned that these kinds of incidents were affecting production, and he wanted to get them straightened out as soon as possible.

Is there trouble at Blue Boulder? What is the general manager concerned about? It appears to have something to do with Luis' delegation practices—or lack thereof. Luis' heavy involvement in operational tasks has taken a toll. He has demonstrated that being busy can interfere with being effective, particularly for a supervisor.

Two potential problems with delegation are that (1) there is not enough of it, and (2) it may not work out. In other words, many supervisors, like Luis, do not delegate enough, and when they do, the result is not what they wanted. This tends to feed a reluctance to delegate in the future. Supervisors may not delegate work for a number of reasons, including:

- Uncertainty about their roles and about how much management responsibility has been delegated to them
- Greater familiarity, comfort, or self-assuredness in operational work
- Need to feel control over results
- An aversion to risk (i.e., “If you want it done right, do it yourself.”)
- Assessment of workers supervised as unable to perform job and handle responsibility
- Fear that someone else's performance will be too good and “show up” the supervisor
- Feeling that owner wants supervisor to stay as active as possible all the time
- Desire to maintain image and prestige of being overworked
- “Smokey the Bear” syndrome—gets a kick from stamping out forest fires (Be aware, though, that rewarding this may create an arsonist!)

All of these reasons are common, and they may be considered grounds for not delegating in some situations, but they are not wise practices for people charged with getting things done through others. Some are even classic barriers to effectiveness as a supervisor.

What may cause delegation to not work when a supervisor does try it? The task, the worker to whom the task was delegated, and the supervisor all may be responsible. If there is a tight deadline, especially for a complex task that challenges the worker's capacity, chances of getting it done right are commensurately limited. A worker who misunderstands the assignment, lacks the cognitive or physical skills needed, or has no desire to perform it will disappoint the delegator. And a supervisor can sabotage his or her own delegation effort by making a poor choice of an employee to entrust with a task or by not carrying out the delegation process carefully. Sometimes it *is* better to do it yourself.

***Delegation simply
may not work.***