



Delegating



Stop Feeling Guilty About Delegating

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by **Dina Smith**

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Published on HBR.org / September 23, 2022 / Reprint [H078GY](#)



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Most leaders understand the payoff of delegating: You free yourself to focus on higher-priority work while offering your team opportunities for growth and development. While this is an excellent idea in theory, many good leaders struggle to put it into practice.

There are many [reasons](#) leaders don't delegate. Some believe they're the only ones who can do the job properly, or that it will take longer to explain than simply doing it themselves. Others don't want to give

up their role of go-to expert or fear being upstaged by their team. More recently, however, guilt about adding more work to a team member's to-do list has been the primary obstacle voiced by the leaders I coach.

Take Kendra, a CMO at an advertising technology company, who stated, "I am so overwhelmed, but so is my team. I feel guilty asking them to do any more work." Or Miguel, founder of a successful fashion brand, whose concern for his team led him to continually take on work he should have delegated.

Caring about the welfare of your team and managing their workload is part of good leadership. But when unchecked guilt gets in the way of delegating, it's a no-win situation. Increased leader workload results in anxiety, burnout, and higher-value work going undone. Further, it can have damaging effects on the very team you are trying to protect. Employees can feel they aren't trusted, which decreases morale and engagement, and a lack of growth opportunities leads to employee turnover.

Here's how to alleviate your guilt and delegate more while still caring for your team.

Challenge your guilt

There are two types of guilt: justified and unjustified. When we have transgressed a moral norm, the uncomfortable but justified feeling of guilt activates our sense of responsibility and encourages us to make amends. Guilt also provides preemptive feedback, enabling us to be proactive in preventing misdeeds and boosting prosocial behavior.

But when we wrongly assume responsibility for a situation or overestimate the suffering we might cause, guilt becomes irrational and

unhealthy. Persistent unjustified guilt is associated with decreased self-esteem, increased anxiety, depression, and physical symptoms.

To distinguish whether the guilt you're feeling is justified or unjustified, ask yourself, "What is stopping me from delegating this task?" and write down whatever thoughts come to mind. For example, Miguel wanted his team to like coming to work, so he took on more tasks ("I could be the one doing this") rather than delegating them.

Challenge your thoughts. Ask yourself: How might I be wrong? What else could be true? Miguel realized that while it was true that he could do the work, it was not the right solution for the team or the company. If you're not hurting someone or contradicting your morals, your guilt is likely unjustified.

Fact-checking your thoughts is especially important if you are guilt-prone, when any sign or possibility of another's suffering and discontent can spur you to take undue responsibility.

Naturally, there will be times when delegating doesn't make sense. However, you hold yourself and your team back when guilt results in a blanket approach of holding onto responsibilities that should be distributed.

Flip your script on delegating

People who feel guilty about delegating worry they're burdening their team. They can also feel responsible for the happiness of others, or believe the needs of others supersede their own.

Instead, recognize the benefits of delegating and reframe your thoughts. For example, consider that rather than burdening your team, you are giving them the chance to grow. Instead of believing that not

delegating will promote team happiness, understand that people love feeling trusted by their leader. Allowing greater contributions and more meaningful work boosts engagement, commitment, and job satisfaction.

Hoarding work at the top is also a no-win situation for your company. Doing it all means you neglect work only you can do, and opportunities are lost. Delegation shifts work to the most appropriate level and pushes out the work that matters least. With the rapid pace of change today, leaders must frequently evaluate and eliminate work that is no longer relevant.

Improve your delegation skills

If you know you don't delegate effectively, and this contributes to your guilt and reluctance, take action. The purpose of "healthy guilt" is to trigger positive change and make amends.

This requires intention and a reallocation of your time. Instead of doing, you lead and support. Start by assessing what's on your plate and determining what you can delegate or delete altogether. Then consider who should take it on: Who has the need or desire to develop these skills or is ready for a new challenge?

It's also helpful to involve your team in this process. For example, Kendra began regularly reviewing all areas of responsibility with her direct reports, asking "Where am I too involved?" and "Where do you need me to get more involved?" to ensure that her team members felt both empowered and supported.

Effective delegating extends far beyond the initial clarifying of desired outcomes and handoff. Set regular checkpoints for feedback, provide coaching along the way, and acknowledge team members for

their contributions and achievements. Your improved delegation skills can help team members feel empowered, supported, and motivated.

Protect your team in different ways

When guilt prevents you from delegating, it often connects to an empathetic but misplaced desire to protect your team. Fortunately, there are other ways for you to shelter your team, without the costs that accompany a lack of delegation.

For instance, help your team members ruthlessly prioritize their work. Proactively engage them in discussions about what work is currently on their plate and quickly eliminate low-value work from their list. Help team members work through competing priorities by clarifying and anchoring in the most important goals for your organization and that person's role and evaluating each task in terms of its importance and urgency.

Additionally, be mindful of shielding your team from external demands. Especially when more senior outside stakeholders make requests of your team members, it can be hard for them to say no. Be willing to step in where necessary to communicate a judicious “no” or “not now” to the stakeholder making the request.

Channel your protective instincts into safeguarding your team from low-value work. In supporting them and ensuring the work they do is meaningful, you can boost team member growth and satisfaction and assuage your guilt.

Prepare for temporary discomfort

Overriding guilt around delegation is not easy. Especially when you and your team are already time-strapped, it can feel misguided to invest

in delegating. But remember this investment will unlock longer-term benefits: time savings and more capable, engaged employees.

No doubt there will be discomfort and setbacks as you and your team adjust to your new leadership style. Accept that mistakes will be made. When you're prone to guilt, you may be quick to beat yourself up and question your decision to delegate. Instead, practice self-compassion, see these missteps as learning opportunities, and move on.

Delegating is a crucial aspect of good leadership; it demonstrates your trust in your team and gives them the opportunity to stretch and grow further in their roles. With some effort, you can learn to move beyond delegation guilt — and free yourself to lead more effectively.

This article was originally published online on September 23, 2022.



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