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The misconceived delegation of responsibility

Oana Georgiana Andronic, Dănuț Dumitrașcu*

Lucian Blaga University, Faculty of Economic Studies, 17 Calea Dumbravii Street, Sibiu 550324, Romania
Lucian Blaga University, Hermann Oberth Faculty of Engineering, 4 Emil Cioran Street, Sibiu 550025, Romania

Abstract

The division of labor and the growing number of businesses have led to the situation where the superior is no longer able to make all decisions alone and therefore is required to delegate. Delegation has been around for a long time and has become critical to modern businesses. We must differentiate between delegating an assignment, in the sense of delegation work and delegating the responsibility. These aspects are often misunderstood or not differentiated at all. Employees should not only be delegated with the execution of tasks but also with the related power to act and decide. Managing through conventional authoritarian principles is no longer sustainable within the current economic trend. This paper aims to present the behavioral pattern of the wrongly-understood delegation of responsibility, instruments and fear of delegation and how this type of approach, which is currently implemented in so many organizations, is actually a misconceived delegation of responsibility.

Keywords: delegation; responsibility; intrapreneurship; authority.

1. The authoritarian form of delegation

Delegation or to delegate is the transfer of power and responsibility from one person or a group of people to others. Delegation is the decentralization of the decision making process and decisions, hence the transfer of objectives, tasks, competencies and responsibility from the top of the hierarchy to subordinated units, positions or people.

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* Oana Georgiana Andronic. Tel.:+0744.15.30.14;
E-mail address: georgi_cristea@yahoo.com, dan.dumitrascu@ulbsibiu.ro

The term to delegate comes from the Latin verb "delegare" and means "to assign", "to allot" or "entrust". The most famous case study regarding delegation can be found in the Bible, 2nd Book of Moses, Chapter 18, and Verse 13-26. We refer here to the translations of Dr. Martin Luther King, because it can also be applicable in our days. Moses (1225 before Christ) led the people from Egypt to Canaan. He was appointed by God but he lacked the necessary management skills:

13 The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening. **14** When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, "What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?" **15** Moses answered him, "Because the people come to me to seek God's will. **16** Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties and inform them of God's decrees and instructions." **17** Moses' father-in-law replied, "What you are doing is not good. **18** 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. **19** 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. **20** Teach them his decrees and instructions, and show them the way they are to live and how they are to behave. **21** But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. **22** Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. **23** If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied." **24** Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said. **25** He chose capable men from all Israel and made them leaders of the people, officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. **26** They served as judges for the people at all times. The difficult cases they brought to Moses, but the simple ones they decided themselves.
(https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus%2018:13-26).

The people stayed in line and waited for Moses decision, who was perceived as the leader of a nation. His philosophy of Leadership and Management is explained through the statement:" I decide... who is right." He considered that only he, as a spiritual leader, has the competency to decide. But in Verse 18, the Midianite Priest Jethro, explains what will happen, if superiors do not understand what it means to delegate the decision making competence and thereof, decentralize the power: all participants will become exhausted and tired, one hand the people because they have to wait so much and on the other hand the leader because he has to make all the decisions alone.

Today, we are facing the same situation, especially in the public administration field. The employees are overworked and are waiting for decisions regarding their proposals, while the leadership dissipates trying to make all decisions alone. Therefore, especially in public administration, the superiors have unlimited interference right over all subordinated employees. Jethro advises that responsibility should be divided and delegated. Moses agreed to be educated about how to manage his people and learned how to divide his power among them, making it possible for them to make decisions instead of him. They had the power to decide on easier matters, but the most complicated were left to him (Verse 26).

From an historical perspective, the outset of all organizations generated a certain delegation pressure through overworking the upper positions in the hierarchy. Instructions were given from top to bottom. This overworking principle led in practice to sustainable regulations within the structure of the organization. Both in case of Jethro as also Moses, the work load removal was performed due to lack of time and knowledge, so they had to delegate specific tasks having no expertise in that particular field. Maintaining, of course, the right of an (authoritarian) superior, to revoke each delegated task or to interfere, according to will, in all areas.
Delegation is perceived as a separation from the power of the superior, who, in spite of the delegation, still holds the entire responsibility over all subordinated departments no matter how large the number of his subordinates is. Essentially, this type of delegation, which is also currently implemented in a lot of organizations, is not actually a delegation of responsibility but a delegation of work.

1.2. The order

The order, as an instruction instrument, fundamentally implies that the superior instructs his subordinates both on the objective as also on how to fulfill this objective together with the according time schedule. The employee's chances to collaborate are zero and their free space to act independently is quite limited. The superior thinks and the subordinate delivers. The classical image of an organization based on orders is: the employee accepts the prescribed order (issued in the working contract). Order and obedience are dominant relationship patterns. Motivation, working relations and in general everything that is emotional are becoming potential disturbance factors on the path to success. The strict hierarchical principle relies on subordination and adaptation. The managerial practice consists of many orders which are not always perceived as negative. Managing through orders implies that the managers require detailed knowledge in the area of expertise of the particular employee and must also know the working materials and methods so that they can show the path towards the objective in a meaningful way. Nowadays, with the growing variety in tasks, the employees are becoming superior at least within their specialty field. In such cases, the order becomes (from technical perspective at least) a management method that is no longer applicable. When the employee knows his working area better than his superior, than he can find the way to reach the objective quicker and better. Also, other issue-related reasons can stand against the order as a management instrument. „ The order as a management instrument contravenes with the understanding of many in our society. This was maybe different in the past years. In the 50s, obedience was part of a central and outmost important educational value in our society. Parents wanted, above all, that their children learn how to be obedient. Today, obedience has not disappeared altogether but is has been diminished to a more subordinate rating. The surveys performed on young parents show that independence ranks first. The ones who are educated towards independence will be annoyed and demotivated, if through orders, all of the free space for independent working is denied". (Rosenstiel, 2002).

There are situations where the order is still acknowledged as a recommended management instrument, but these situations are nevertheless exceptions. An example thereof, would be a situation in production or in the administration field with less challenging tasks where each working step and action for achieving the objective is regulated and clearly defined. In most cases the order doesn't come from the superior because it is already „integrated" in the work process. In such situations, it is more advisable to incorporate free spaces within the working process through certain forms of „Job-Enrichment", that meet the educational background and qualification of the employee, hence, which further develop their qualification.

Also, perceived as „normal" is the order within the military field or in special organizations as rescue service or fire department in critical situations. For example, issuing an order within the fire department (after assessment and planning) is part of the management process which the team leader must follow when they reach the scene of a fire. In this case, the orders of the team leader are clear und unambiguous directives which must be followed. If the superior of the team leader is involved, than his orders are overriding. In case of delays, the team leader can also decide individually. In this respect, it counts as a delegation of the responsibility for action. (Schröder, 2010).

1.3. Managing through assignment delegation

Managing through conventional authoritarian principles is mainly characterized by the fact that the employee is managed through single assignments, by the fact that he has to act according to the instructions given by the superior and that the superior can interfere whenever he wants by deciding or changing decisions already made by the employee. Delegation was also used in the past, as seen in the above mentioned „Jethro" case study. However, the superiors limit themselves to delegating the work, while they reserve the right to make decisions and bear responsibility. Nowadays, this somehow older management style, where the entire power to make decisions and hence, the entire responsibility, lies in the hands of the superior, is no longer sustainable within the current economic trend. Division of work and the growing number of businesses led to a situation where the superior is no longer able to make all decisions alone. He has to delegate certain tasks to his employees. Both the everyday language as also the specialty literature do not describe the behavior labeled as delegation in a unitary approach. We must make the difference between delegating the assignment, in the sense of delegation of work and delegating the responsibility, hence delegative leadership. Delegating the assignment outlines the transfer of a task to a subordinate position, in

which competencies and responsibility are not delegated at all or at very little extent. In a more exaggerated formulation, we can ascertain that according to the authoritarian form of delegation, the superior delegates mainly work but not responsibility.

Authoritarian leadership concepts are based primary on an information flow performed bottom up, inversely, there is little information flow. In addition, there is also an extensive disciplinary authority of the superior and a strict personal control. Main components of this type of control are the inspections of the whole incoming mail and drafting on the part of the superior. We should, therefore, not misplace delegation with „disposal". Employees should not only be delegated the execution of tasks but also the related power to act and decide. (Jonathan Gosling, Stephanie Jones, Ian Sutherland, 2012)

1.4. *The fear of delegation*

The question that arises is why some superior delegate to little. The specialty literature identifies the following reasons:

- Habit: the superior has the habit, to perform the task himself. He doesn't even take into consideration the option to delegate the task.
- Favorite activity: the superior is not ready to delegate certain tasks, because these are his favorite activities. He delegates other tasks because he doesn't know or understands them.
- Little patience: superiors are unburdened through planned delegation of tasks on medium and long term. Optionally, employees must be trained in new areas of activity, thereof, some superior have little patience to handle this learning process.
- Incapacity to organize the work: the main excuse of having no time. Because something needs to be done now, the task is performed by the manager. Long term planning and reflections are forgotten in the hectic and stress of daily routine.
- Lack in discipline: The superior accepts back delegation without any other inquiries.

Other reasons for the lack in willingness and/or capability to delegate could be the fear of the superior, that:

- The employee can perform a task differently
- The employee can perform better and in time take his place.
- They lose reputation if the employee is successful
- They lose control
- They lose sight of the situation
- The superior might react bad if something goes wrong
- They lose authority.

The superior together with his lack of self-esteem and low self-assurance relies often on his position and appeals to the conception of duty and task execution as an employee's obligation. He relies (authoritarian) on position and official duties and is conducted by ideas of status and prestige. In this case, the fear of delegation is especially big. (Robert Heller, 1999)

1.5. *The wrongly interpreted overall responsibility*

The following demonstration of power from the daily routine of a sorely afflicted Head of Government in Germany leads us into the problematic of manager's responsibility:
Thousands of tons of toxic industrial waste were secretly disposed in the waste dump of a small community in the Hanau surrounding area. The search for the culprits began. The authorities tried to establish the length of pollution. Before the responsible Environment Minister resigned, he tried to redeem his act by assigning foresters, lumbermen, firefighters and motor carrier a removing waste action. The action was supposed to happen without knowledge of the Prime Minister, but when he found out, he considered that he should be the one to make decisions and issued an order to stop the action, invoking safety reasons, and to start the transport on the next day. His order was stopped by the representatives of the responsible Environment Minister (a superior Council). The Council ordered that no waste

should be removed. When the State Chancellery heard about the happenings, they allowed the Head of Government to continue with the action. (Frankfurter Rundschau, 1973).

Also today, citizens and media consider that the Heads of the Economy and Administration act like the Prime Minister from the above given example. They consider that the ones who earn more should also bear more responsibility. If there is a failure in the administration, than the public will not look for less important culprits but quickly blame the ones to bear the overall responsibility, because sometimes it is easier to blame the person that holds the so called final responsibility. This final responsibility is also called overall responsibility and is the bases for all the massive critic directed towards superiors, if it comes to mistakes in their jurisdiction. As long as managers are hold accountable for every mistake a subordinated employee makes, than they are being encouraged to act according to self-interest and to interfere in all areas. Only when managers are released from this wide covering responsibility, it can be expected that they will also stop the unnecessary interference in the area of activity of their employees and will deal with the tasks that their position implies. The defenders of accumulation of responsibility within organizations believe that by overall responsibility, an organization can achieve a higher level of responsibility and if a mistake occurs, than there is at least one person or a team that can be hold accountable for it. This is, however, debatable. Indeed, this type of „shared responsibility" may increase the interest of performing best so that no one has to suffer but on the other hand it contradicts with the principle that responsibility must always be individual.

Still, the term „overall responsibility" must not be ignored, as it is being used also in the job offers that we find everyday: „ we are looking for a Finance and Controlling Manager, who can bear overall responsibility on all management areas in this field" or „ we are looking for a total operational manager who will report directly to the CEO and is responsible for approximately 230 employees. You bear overall responsibility..." (FAZ, 2006).

The German sociologist Luhmann (2005) showed to what consequences the accumulated responsibility can lead in practice: the superior is afraid to hold his subordinates accountable, because „thereby he updates his own responsibility". The responsible person can argue the common fault to his superior. A general obliteration of responsibility with the consequence that mistakes are covered are hence the core of this type of system where the superiors can be drawn into the responsibility of their subordinates. This system tends, according to Luhmann:" not really towards discovering the mistakes, but more, towards a collision in concealment." In practice, the total responsibility of the superior is of great advantage for the employee, giving him the opportunity to escape responsibility. An experienced practician has, according to Luhmann: „ a lot of possibilities to move within the system without triggering anything. He knows exactly the limits where responsibility becomes an expression of responsibility, so that he doesn't clumsy exceed them but aware and with the necessary protection. He can spread responsibility by letting also others take part in the decision process. Special experts, conferences or committees, so facilities, which already institutionally oppose the hierarchic classification, are used as a Spanish wall. These are involved and are being called upon".

It is most likely that the entire system of responsibility in economy and administration cannot be solved from the perspective of responsibility but also by giving the position of the superior, which is sadly nowadays still strongly characterized by the authoritarian conceptual approach, a new foundation.

1.6. Delegation upon cancellation

For an employee, the delegation upon cancellation makes the continuous acknowledgement of the remit impossible. An employee, which always expects his superior to interfere at his sole discretion and out of different and unforeseen reasons in his delegated remit, will from the beginning and understandably, adjust to his superior approach, thereby remaining in the limits of an imposed working style. The superior, who has an undefined right and power to interfere, will perceive the attempts of his employees to transfer the responsibility to him, as a welcomed stimulant for interference. If the superior denies responsibility, than he will anyway not make use of his right to interfere and this will affect the working style of the whole organization. Completely different is the discussion regarding a generous applicability of the delegating principle. The transfer of competencies and responsibilities must not follow the pattern: all or nothing. It can also be implemented gradually within a new employee, from the perspective of the situational leadership style. The gradually implemented delegation process can be concluded when

the employee decides on a problem and ends alone a certain process, while the superior limits himself to random control.

2. Conclusion

The principle of delegating responsibility not only allows employees to take part in the decision making process but also delegates employees certain decision processes which consist of objective, tasks and competencies. Currently organization pride themselves on delegating responsibility to their employees but this type of responsibility is often misconceived. In many cases the superior bears the overall responsibility, makes all the necessary decisions and interferes at will in all departments, so he acts in the sense of the above mentioned authoritarian delegating style. In turns, the employee acts according to the instructions of his superior. This approach implies managing through conventional authoritarian principle and is no longer sustainable within the current economic trend. Hence, a new foundation for action must be implemented, so that it can enhance the employee to act and decide autonomously. Also, the idea that the superior must possess expert knowledge in all fields must be abandoned. Delegating responsibility is based on the fact that the superior is no longer required to know more than his employees in order to carry out his function as a superior. Managing by delegating responsibility gives, thus, a new authority principle. If the superior behaves correctly and does not interfere in the delegation area of his employees than he also gains in personal authority. In turns, the employee gains self-confidence, learns how to make decisions alone, takes responsibility for both his success and failure and can become an entrepreneurial employee. The organization will also develop faster by encouraging a climate of "intrapreneurship" and thereof maintain an advantage on today's competitive market.

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