

Markus Jotzo

Letting Go for Leaders

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More Responsibility for Employees

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*For my father, my mother and my grandmother,
who have always seen great potential in me.*

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I should have done it myself ...

The stack of files on the desk resembles the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the calendar is full for the next three weeks, and there are a record 582 unread e-mails in the inbox. Key account manager Michael Henderson sighs and pushes his chair backwards. He also needs to prepare for tomorrow's meeting, but how is he going to find the time to do that as well?

"I really must delegate something, otherwise I'll miss the deadline for the major project," he thinks. "But what?" It must be something that can be done quickly. Something simple, so that Henderson can pass it on to one of his people without much explanation and still get good results.

"I got it!" He picks up the phone and dials Alex Randall's internal number. A quarter of an hour later, the employee stands in Henderson's office.

"Please gather the sales figures we have achieved over the last three years with our twelve A-list corporate customers and get a potential analysis done by noon tomorrow. I need to see the results an hour before the meeting. This is extremely important, but I simply can't fit it in myself."

Randall swallows. He hesitates for a moment and then says: "Okay, boss. I also have to prepare a presentation and I still have four telephone appointments on my list today, but if it's that urgent, I'll squeeze it in." The next day, 55 minutes before the meeting, Randall sends the e-mail with the results presented in an Excel spreadsheet. Henderson takes a look at it – and despairs.

"He hasn't understood what it was all about!" Randall has carefully selected the sales figures of the A-list customers from the last three years. However, it appears that he hasn't realized what the real task was. He has given the total turnover of each company over the last

three years instead of listing the different product sectors for each company. Furthermore, there is something that is crystal clear to key account manager Henderson, and yet Randall hasn't even put it on the spreadsheet, namely determining possible further fields for cooperation with customers.

These possibilities immediately catch the eye of the more experienced Henderson. There is, for example, the company Brinker & Sondner. Every year they have been buying more virgin vegetable oils and aloe vera products and less complex liposomes, apparently expanding their line of natural cosmetics in the light of a possible shrinking of the medical skin care products sector.

This, Henderson knows, could be a starting point to offer this company new organically farmed products. Randall, on the other hand, has only noticed the broader picture, namely that sales with Brinker & Sondner have been stagnating. He recommends focusing on other business customers that generate more revenue. In short, his analysis is completely useless for Henderson's purposes. Frustrated, the key account manager slaps his desk.

"Well, now I have to go over everything again! Why didn't I do it myself in the first place?"

Part I

One more minute to play ...

1 A Leadership Job or a Leading Role in the Job? – What Your Actual Task Is

“... prepare the presentation for Dr. Clark from the management board for tomorrow, check the contract for the new customer, plan the budget for the next quarter, go through the travel expenses with the assistant and ... wasn't there something else?”

Sales manager Harold Stewart is just coming from a meeting with marketing. As he rushes through the hallway, he mentally runs through the tasks he still needs to do. Like a slight toothache, he is plagued by the feeling that something important is missing. “Surely,” he says to himself. “There must have been something else.” Yet he can't figure it out.

“Oh, Mr. Stewart, it's good to see you here,” a voice draws him out of his thoughts: The project manager is standing beside the photocopier in the corridor and has seen the sales manager passing by – a good time to address his superior.

“Friday is the deadline for the new field service concept,” says the project manager, outlining his own particular problem. “We must be ready by then; in fact, we've already sped up our operations to finish it a week before. Now all we need is the approval of Dr. Clark, but I have no idea how to get a hold of him these days.”

“Oh, Dr. Clark!” Stewart is immediately present for he knows there is no way for a project manager to get an appointment with the managing director at such short notice. “I cannot possibly watch the whole project being delayed for such a stupid reason,” he thinks to himself – and immediately has a solution: “I have a meeting with the management tomorrow morning, Dr. Clark will also be there,” he reassures his project manager. “Send me your elaborated concept by e-mail and I'll clear it with him tomorrow.”

That evening, Stewart quickly reads his employee's e-mail and makes an observation. “The attachment is 27 pages long! And there are serious mistakes even on the first page!” He runs to the project manager's office, but he's long gone. He swears and slams the door shut. Normally, he

would immediately ask his employee to check the whole file again. But as he wants to clarify the matter with Dr. Clark tomorrow, he has no choice but to revise the concept himself.

Two hours later, Stewart switches off the lights in the office and clocks off. Home time at last! He breathes deeply and starts to relax, but then a thought hits him like a thunderbolt, because now he suddenly remembers what didn't come to him earlier that afternoon when the project manager spoke to him in the corridor: Today is his wedding anniversary!

"Damn it, where on earth am I supposed to get a bouquet of flowers at this time of night?"

Being indispensable

In theory, every manager knows perfectly well: If you want to have time and peace of mind for your work, you need responsible employees who act independently. Employees only act in a responsible, independent manner if the boss gives them room to assume responsibility and develop independence. This includes not interfering with the details and certainly not doing the work of others themselves! That's the theory; however, in practice it is often quite different.

Many bosses know the problem: Although they have a management job, they often find themselves in situations that make their involvement in the operative arm of the business appear absolutely necessary. This is despite the clear division of roles between management and employees: The manager is in charge of the management and the employees are responsible for the execution of his instructions. Yet, when poor project management puts the workflow at risk, it is often the boss himself who steps into the breach. After all, he is responsible for the results of the whole team or even the department. Indeed, because he doesn't want to deliver half measures, in addition to his management duties he is also doing voluntary overtime to save his employees' projects. The result is an awful lot of extra hours.

The only question is this: When is there time for relaxation? And what about private commitments? After all, the next day is going to be another stressful one. The job may be fun ... but like this? And then there is the classical argument of, “I myself decided to become a manager. I knew from the beginning what I was getting into ... well, somewhat like this”. Such things are often said by overburdened managers when calming themselves down. And then, perhaps after a brief whine on one of their colleague’s shoulders, they sit down again at the desk – and continue just as before.

Many executives believe that being in charge means a lot of work and overtime and accept the high workload as a necessary evil. However, in many cases, part of their suffering is homemade: In addition to their management duties, many bosses also have operational responsibilities. Without even noticing, they are mercilessly overburdening themselves through their interference in day-to-day business, leading them to neglect their actual tasks. The more often the boss steps in to help, the less time he has for reflection and strategic planning, at which point you have to wonder, where are the ideas supposed to come from? How can he get to grips with the excessive workload? A vicious circle indeed!

If the team says “The meeting has been rescheduled. The boss is on holiday and desperately wants to attend” or “The boss has been ill for five days and no one else can make decisions”, then this is a clear sign that this boss has made far too many things solely a matter for himself.

Of course, the boss is responsible for his team. Nevertheless, does this mean that he has to be involved in every decision and has to be informed about every piece of news that arises in a project? No, of course not. The boss does not work on the various projects he is responsible for; therefore, project-specific decisions are always the responsibility of his employees, and yet many bosses interfere in the project work of their teams. Sometimes more so, sometimes less, but always with the serious consequence that their actual tasks are neglected.

The strongest intervention in the process takes place when the boss intervenes proactively; for example, by taking on a subtask of an employee on the grounds that this will be faster, better and more efficient. He may think that he is supporting his team through his actions, clearing up obstacles and creating the right conditions for the project to continue working properly. In reality, however, he is doing a task that clearly belongs to the employee.

Other interventions are more subtle. When employees come to their boss, because they have a problem they don't know how to deal with, many bosses simply throw out their solution without even challenging the employees to come up with their own solutions. In this way, the boss has already been involved in the operative work – and has worked on it. Yet, this often happens unconsciously.

It is only human for executives to fall into these traps again and again, even when they are aware that the actual business operations are not their task. Ultimately, all manner of positive intentions lie behind this particular behavior.

Managers become managers because their characters imbue such features as initiative, hard work, an awareness of quality, and an eye for detail, and there are plenty of reasons to get involved through positive impulses. After all, every boss wants to ensure the success of his department. Some people think that they can do their jobs faster than their employees. Others assume that it is their job to make all decisions and take on operational tasks. Maybe he learned it that way and he can't imagine it being any different. Yet another person may be convinced that he is simply the best at solving certain tasks.

A classic example are conversations with important customers that the boss conducts personally. A customer meeting is anything but a management topic – it belongs to operations and therefore lies strictly in the hands of an employee. If bosses allow customers to view him as the only person to whom they can talk, this is an unmistakable sign that something is wrong.

Trying to take over the reins is not an aid but an encroachment. Regardless of whether the boss wants to work faster or better – or whether he hasn't learnt it differently – it is a fact that this makes him an indispensable employee in the business operations.

Employees quickly get used to the boss solving their problems for them or even completing parts of their tasks. They will learn that the boss will take over their responsibilities and, therefore, will of course more and more frequently take him up on this generous offer.

They hand over responsibility and independent thinking to a gatekeeper, because that's what the boss is there for. He, in turn, invests a lot of time in coping with these additional tasks. At some point he feels as if he is working around the clock. No wonder then that he loses track of his actual task, the leadership of his employees, and his focus on the long-term goals. However, without a clear focus, the department firstly will be less able to support the company's goals and secondly will find it more difficult to refuse tasks that do not or only weakly contribute to achieving company goals. The entire effort put in by the boss is therefore counterproductive.

Thus, make this clear to yourself: Leading does not mean being the best employee or making a name for yourself as an expert in the team, not even if you do this out of the best possible intentions. Instead, use your knowledge and skills to inspire and guide your employees in the right direction. You are in the comfortable situation of merely having to hold the reins in your hand while others pull the carriage for you. This will, however, only happen if you allow it to. Ask yourself the question: Do I work *on* my department or *in* my department?

Free yourself from the burden. Achieve significantly better results with less sweat.

How can you do that?

First: Stop interfering in the day-to-day business and leave it to the employees who are responsible for it.

Second: Don't let your employees force you into the role of the decision maker, but rather pass the ball back into their court.

Third: Do your homework and concentrate on your core task, namely leading your employees.

First: Exiting the daily business

Many managers have their hands in the day-to-day business not only in crisis situations but also during normal operations. If you are thinking about the details while your employees are working on precisely these, you will actually be working at full capacity – and running the risk of jeopardizing the process. Such as the following boss, who doesn't suspect that anything bad is happening:

“Yes, that works out. We've even got a certain time buffer in there.” Project manager Theo Fisher is satisfied. The news that one of the necessary components will be delivered ten days later than originally planned, with another one arriving a week earlier, initially caused a great deal of confusion in the project planning. After some tweaking, Fisher has now found a solution for the new deadlines and sets the revised schedule. Then he reckons its time to get some coffee. Cup in hand, he meets his boss on the way back.

“Well, Mr. Fisher, how's the project going?”

“Very well. The external programmers are delivering later than originally planned, but we have found a good solution. In fact, this even improves the final result, because we can incorporate the findings from the first test run into our briefing.”