The Delegation Dilemma: Why Capable Leaders Struggle to Let Go

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It is rarely a skills gap

Most leaders know, in principle, how to delegate: define the outcome, hand over the task, check in at agreed points. The advice is not complicated. And yet under-delegation remains one of the most common patterns in leadership coaching conversations, particularly among leaders who were promoted for being excellent individual performers. The barrier is usually not a lack of technique. It is what delegation asks a leader to give up.

What is actually being protected

A sense of competence. For many leaders, doing the work themselves is where their confidence comes from. Handing it over can feel like relinquishing the very thing that made them successful in the first place, even when their role has clearly outgrown that work.

Control over quality. "It will be faster if I just do it" is often true in the short term and expensive in the long term. The hidden cost is not just the leader's time; it is the team's stalled development and, eventually, their disengagement from meaningful work.

Certainty about outcomes. Delegating means accepting that the result will likely be different from what the leader would have produced themselves, not necessarily worse, but different. Many leaders find this harder to tolerate than they expect.

The cost of holding on

Under-delegation compounds quietly. The leader becomes a bottleneck, decisions slow down, and capable team members either disengage from stretch opportunities or eventually leave for roles where they are trusted with more. Meanwhile, the leader's own capacity for higher-level work, the strategic thinking, stakeholder relationships, and judgement calls that only they can make, is consumed by tasks someone else could have handled.

What actually helps, beyond the standard advice

Delegate the decision, not just the task. Handing over execution while still making every decision is not real delegation; it is supervised labour. Real delegation includes transferring some genuine decision-making authority, within clear boundaries.

Tolerate a visible dip in quality early on. The first few attempts by someone new to a task will often be rougher than the leader's own work would have been. This is the cost of building capability, not evidence that delegation was a mistake.

Separate "different" from "wrong." A useful habit is to ask, when reviewing delegated work, whether the outcome actually fails to meet the requirement, or whether it simply would not have been the

leader's personal approach. These are frequently confused.

Notice what you tell yourself in the moment you take a task back. The internal story, "this is too important to risk," "it will take longer to explain than to do," is usually where the real pattern lives, more than in any process failure.

A different way to measure success

A useful marker of good delegation is not whether the delegated work was completed exactly as the leader would have done it. It is whether the team member grew more capable, and whether the leader's own time was freed for work that genuinely required their level of judgement. Measured this way, delegation becomes less about giving something up and more about deliberately investing in the organisation's future capacity.