



ON LEADERSHIP, DELEGATION AND WHACK-A-MOLE

✧ · by [Carlann Fergusson](#) · in [Authentic Leadership](#), [Coaching Corner](#), [Conflict Management](#), [Leadership Lessons](#)

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Delegating is a difficult skill to master. Many leaders make it to high levels in their careers and within organizations without ever mastering this skill. And this can be a big problem!

Someone recently asked “*Why are some executives so poor at delegating?*”

On Delegation and Details

We expect that executives should know how to effectively delegate by the time they have gotten to a senior level.

But like any skill, position level has little to do with it any one person mastering the skill of delegation.

When the nature of the work reinforces an executive into thinking that they need to have **direct knowledge** of every detail of the work, **poor delegation will follow.**

Let the Games Begin

Whack a Mole with a Telephone

Manufacturing and **retail industries** are two examples where executives are driven to focus on the details. Each area of the business must focus on key levers of running the **day-to-day operations** to ensure the entire system is running smoothly.

It can easily become a game of “**whack-a-mole.**”

The executive quickly addresses the **latest issue that pops up** and then prepares for the next to pop. Instead of a padded mallet however, the executive has a phone or email.

The executive quickly calls their direct report responsible giving a too brief synopsis of the issue and an order to “take care of it immediately.” The direct report who has been through this too many times knows not to ask questions but to say “Yes, consider it done.”

He or she then runs off to quickly band-aid the situation. Both the executive and the direct report move quickly anticipating the next mole to pop.

Success is the illusion that everything is running smoothly.

Lacking an Important Skill

You Obviously Don't Know How to Wield a Hammer

This **conditioned response** can lead to a bipolar style of delegation. First, it may appear the executive is trusting the manager to do his or her job by giving just the essence of the issue and then allowing the manager to proceed in his/her best judgment.

However, if the manager does not solve the situation to the executive's unstated expectations, the executive often pendulum swings to the other side of delegation and micro-manages. The executive may assume the manager can't be trusted or doesn't have the knowledge or skill needed to be effective.

All of this back-and-forth interaction unfortunately often drags the executive back down into the **day-to-day operations**.

Missing the Mark

An Ego or Victim Trip

The more their managers miss the undefined mark, the more the executive believes that he or she is the only capable person to run the business.

This reinforces their belief that they must personally "be on top of every detail" in order to be successful.

This may appear as an ego trip; with the executive thinking they are the only one intelligent enough to figure it all out. But it may be more of a victim trip? "Poor me, look at how busy I am – I have to take on the burden of running this company single-handedly."

Our mind-talk can end up being our worst enemy.

Regardless of ego or victim trip, how does a leader get out of this trap?

Building a Better Mole Trap

Creating Ways to Delegation Success

When something goes wrong with delegation, the key to overcoming this is to focus on the performance discrepancy instead of the manager's deficiency.

An easy way to see if you are part of the problem is to ask some questions spurred from **Robert Mager** and **Peter Pipe's** thinking in [Analyzing Performance Problems](#):

- *Are my expectations crystal clear?*
- *Have I clearly defined what success should look like?*

- *Could my manager/employee do what I am wanting (not necessarily asking if my expectations are unclear) if their career depended on it? If the answer is yes, then it is not an issue of lack of skill or knowledge.*
- *If they could do it but are not, what other factors could be causing the issue? (e.g. lack of resources, conflicting goals, lack of quality measures, misaligned consequences)*

When I've asked myself these questions, I can often stop at the first, realizing that while rushing around I wasn't as clear as I could have been.

Time to call Mole Busters Slowing Down to Speed Up

Unless you take the time to find the mole's breeding ground, you are stuck containing individual moles along the network of paths they have created.

To effectively delegate, the leader must slow down to speed up. But slowing down is something very counterintuitive to their daily "whack-a-mole" conditioning and counter to the staffing algorithms so often used that don't allocate time for addressing strategic issues.

Consider the time that will be saved in frustration, re-work and micro-managing problems and then ask yourself if you can make the time to lead your staff in an analysis of reoccurring issues.

Which exterminator would you rather hire?:

- Killing moles **one-at-a-time** for over 25 years
 - **Eliminating your mole problem** at the source
- When you look at it this way, it becomes a cost and time savings to go to the root of the issue.

What other tips do you have to avoid blindly digging yourself into a hole of delegating ineffectively?

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