

Learning to 'Let Go'

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ABSTRACT

Typically, as we gain more industry experience, we tend to move more towards leadership roles and further away from day to day programming. One of the difficult things that comes with this is finding the balance of project leadership and programming. In this presentation I aim to share tips that I've gathered from my colleagues and personal experience on how to get this balance and learn to 'let go' of a bit more of the programming side of our roles.

INTRODUCTION

Finding the balance between the day to day programming and taking on more leadership responsibilities has been the battle that plagues most any project lead that I've spoken to during my time in Industry. It seems to be a never-ending struggle to try and maintain a balance without feeling 'out of touch' or as though I am the bottle neck when it comes to deliverables for my team, and given that I've been hearing this same complaint from project lead from my first few weeks as a programmer I have gathered some pointers from resources online, my colleagues and personal experience for this paper that will help others learn to let go and delegate more as their leadership responsibilities increase.

WHY SHOULD I LET GO?

It's so easy to think to yourself 'It would take less time for me to just do the task myself that it would to explain it to someone else' or 'This isn't a nice task, no one in the team would want to take it on, so I'll just do it' – for myself at least there's an urge to jump on to every task and help solve it, especially when new to a leadership role or to a team and there's a need to almost prove to yourself why you're in the role that you're in. Whilst this may seem the case in the short term, in the long term the cost of keeping this mindset are quite high; tasks that seem small at first start to add up and take up a significant portion of your time, you work longer hours and yet still feel like there isn't enough time in the day to get everything done, at some point your team will start to get the message that you don't trust them and might look for other opportunities, and eventually the amount of work on your plate and responsibilities that you've taken on will lead to stress and burnout. This scenario may resonate with a lot of readers, and in order to avoid situations like this, we must learn to 'let go' and delegate effectively and efficiently.

Stephen R. Covey writes in 'The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People' "The ability to delegate to others is the main difference between the roles of manager and independent producer. A producer does whatever is necessary to accomplish desired results, to get the golden eggs. ... But when a person sets up and works with and through people and systems to produce golden eggs, that person becomes a manager in the interdependent sense. ... A producer can invest one hour of effort and produce one unit of results, assuming no loss of efficiency. A manager, on the other hand, can invest one hour of effort and produce ten or fifty or a hundred units through effective delegation. Management is essentially moving the fulcrum over, and the key to effective management is delegation."

DELEGATING EFFECTIVELY & EFFICIENTLY

'Delegate' can be seen as a 'dirty word' within the working world – especially when we feel that our assets as programmers are directly linked to the number of outputs, apps or datasets that we can produce. New leaders may fear that delegating work can lead to them being perceived as lazy and that they are pushing work to others so that they don't have to do it. Given this, here are some steps to learn how to delegate effectively to increase you and your team's productivity.

THE MINDSET SHIFT

As we move 'up' in our careers and into leadership positions, our impact is no longer based on what we work on directly, but rather how we enable our team to work together and achieve results, and so it follows that our mindset needs to shift from focusing on doing to leading others.

This can be done in many different ways, for example, shift from honing your own skills in R to helping another member of your team learn the basics of data manipulation so that they then have some foundation blocks for the next analysis that you are asked to do within R (and then you don't feel like you have to do the whole task yourself). Another example would be simply reassigning tasks from your list that focus on generating tangible outcomes such as datasets or outputs and focus on providing them the support they would need to produce this work, over just doing it yourself.

One of the biggest reasons that some people find it hard to let go and to embrace this mindset shift is that they are always aiming for perfection first time round, which is a noble aim if not unrealistic. We need to be willing to admit and accept that not everything is perfect the first time around, that mistakes get made and they are not reflections of competence or ability, but rather opportunities to learn and grown from. Once we are able to accept this for ourselves, then delegating to others may not seem such a daunting prospect.

If, once accepting the above, delegating to someone else still seems a struggle, ask yourself a few key questions; what am I afraid of happening, what is the worst case scenario here – is it likely to happen or is it exaggerated in my mind? And what is going to happen if I continue working this way? Am I going to burnout, am I harming the team's morale? I find that my keeping these in my mind, I gain a bit of perspective about my work and it helps to shift my frame of mind from wanting to do it all myself to wanting to reach out and utilize the talent around me within my team, after all, they're there for a reason – for us to work together to achieve results.

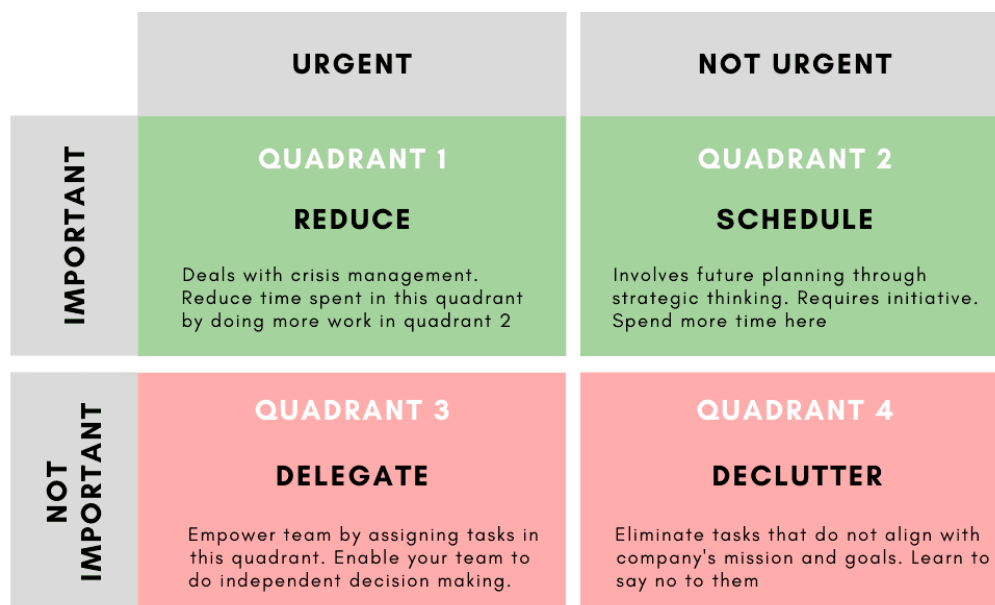
WHAT SHOULD I DELEGATE?

Once we have started to accept our mindset shift, the next question that we might be asking is 'what can I delegate?' or 'how do I decide which tasks to let go of?'

One method to help you make this decision is to ask yourself a series of questions to determine which task on your plate that you can delegate to. If you can answer 'yes' to at least one of them, then you can hand it on to someone else on your team:

- Does someone else on the team have the necessary information or knowledge to complete this task? Or can they be given the necessary information if not?
- Would this task provide a development opportunity for someone?
- Do you have enough time to delegate the task effectively?
- Is this a task that will likely need to be done again in the future?
- Is this a task that I *should* delegate?

Another method that can help you here is to use the Eisenhower Matrix (also called an urgent-important matrix) to manage the workload that you have and then identify that which you can let go of, wither completely or to hand on to someone else within the team.



As we can see here, there is an entire quadrant dedicated to tasks that can be delegated to others to free up your time to work on more important items. You can even take some tasks that fall into quadrant 2 and distribute them amongst your team and be there for support.

PLAY TO THE STRENGTHS OF YOUR TEAM

Once we have our mindset shift and the tasks that we want to delegate, we need to focus on the crucial part of getting the job done well – picking the right person for the task. To do this, you need to know the strengths of those within your team, what they do well, where they would like to develop and their capacity to take on work. It's all too easy to fall into the trap of delegating a task to whoever has the freest time at the moment, so take the time to really think about the task that you are wanting to let go of, and ensure that the person with the right skillset and interest is the one to take it on.

For example, you may have someone on your team who is new to the industry and to the programming language you use, but has a lot of free time to help out – if the task that you need to delegate is a complex output needed within the next couple of days, this person is unlikely to be the right person for the task, you'd ideally be wanting someone more experienced with the modelling and the programming aspects of the analysis. On the flip side, if you needed some project wiki pages updating with information about a programming plan or links to specifications, this would likely be ideal to hand on to someone who is newer to the team for them to learn where to find information and get up to speed with how the team works.

BE SPECIFIC

This doesn't mean be specific about exactly how you want the task to be done, but rather be specific about your expectations surrounding the task. When does it need doing by, what is the end goal and what are your expectations are all things to be up front about. Essentially, focus on asking for the results rather than the method used to get there.

You should ensure that you provide precise and upfront instructions and ensure that they have been written down and communicated across, to prevent any misunderstanding on what is being asked of them. Be careful though to not appear as though you want it doing in the exact manner that you would have used – allow your team some flexibility and freedom to complete the task in their own way.

Another way to think about this is to 'delegate problems, not solutions'. You do not have to have solved an issue before you hand it on to your team - this I find especially difficult as I don't want to appear as if I'm lazy and handing off work that I just don't want to do. Your team cannot learn and grow if you don't trust them to come up with and implement their own solutions. Empower them to do so by ensuring they have all the relevant knowledge and skillsets needed, and then trust them to go away and handle the task at hand.

DON'T MICROMANAGE

Nobody likes to think of themselves as a micromanager, just like nobody enjoys being micromanaged. Trust your team to do the tasks that you have assigned them to do, and remember that there's a difference between doing something 'wrong' and your team not doing something the way that you would have done it. As mentioned above, trust your team's capabilities and that you've ensured they have all the correct tools – and then leave them to it. Resist the urge to check in more frequently than is necessary and interfere, and wait until the task is completed before you judge how successful it has been.

It can be difficult to know how often is too often to check in, so set those expectations when assigning the task, ask your team member how often they would like to meet to discuss the work and then re-evaluate as needed.

COMMUNICATE

Just because you have delegated a task to someone, doesn't mean you should take a complete step back and be unreachable. You should ensure that you're still available for them to ask questions of and be able to reliably communicate with your team members. People do still need support and communication to feel empowered, and just knowing that you are there to lend a hand when needed can keep them motivated. It seems almost contradictory to what has been said in the previous section, but this is all about finding the balance between checking in too often and too little, which is why the conversation about the frequency of meetings and updates can be so useful here.

FEEDBACK

Without feedback from those around us, we never truly know how we're doing in our roles, which is why this is such an important step.

Ensure that you and your team are comfortable addressing anything that is concerning to you or them, and try to identify these early on so any issues can be resolved sooner rather than later. Being able to be open and honest with each other about any potential shortcomings is likely to strengthen the working relationship as you work on these together.

Always acknowledge when a task has been done well. Praising your team and ensuring that credit is given to them for the hard work is sure to help build more trust and respect.

LET GO

Delegation and letting go is an ongoing process and something that is likely to consistently be on most development plans. That's because once you start letting go, inevitably there will come a time when a deadline is missed, or something isn't done in the way that you would have preferred, and your instinctive reaction will be to blame yourself and think 'Why did I let someone else do this – I should have taken care of it myself?' In this situation, instead of letting your frustration take control and allowing you to take the work back and put it onto your to do list, look at this instead as a learning opportunity. Take a step back and evaluate the situation to see what you could do differently in the future. Work alongside the team and consider conducting a debrief, where you can all work together to try and improve situations like this in the future.

Practice makes perfect with something like this, and with experience and increased trust between yourself and your team, letting go of tasks will become earlier.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, letting go of tasks requires you to become more comfortable with delegation. In order to become more comfortable with it, you need to learn how to delegate effectively.

Firstly, there needs to be a mindset shift and a realization that trying to do all the tasks yourself causes a myriad of problems. It prevents your team from developing, causes you to feel stressed and burned out, and gives the impression that you don't trust those around you to do the job correctly. Once you have realized this and that you need to let go of some of your tasks, you can then identify those which you can delegate, then identify the team members that can take these on. Empower them to do the task their way by ensuring they have all the information needed and that you aren't constantly watching over their shoulder to see whether it is being done in the way that you would do it. Allow yourself to be reachable and to be in communication with them when they need you, and encourage regular feedback to be given between yourself and the team.

Letting go will take constant practice, but it will ultimately increase the productivity of yourself and your team.

REFERENCES

<https://www.techtello.com/how-to-delegate-work-effectively/>

<https://www.techtello.com/eisenhower-productivity-matrix/>

<https://us.aicpa.org/interestareas/youngcpanetwork/resources/leadership/managementbydelegationlearntoletgo>

RECOMMENDED READING

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change, Dr Stephen R Covey

Developing the Leaders Around You: How to Help Others Reach Their Full Potential, John Maxwell

The 4-Hour Workweek: Escape 9-5, Live Anywhere, and Join the New Rich, Timothy Ferriss

How Office Control Freaks Can Learn to Let Go - <https://hbr.org/2013/10/how-office-control-freaks-can-learn-to-let-go>

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