

Delegating Work, Effectively

Delegation is a skill – skills can be learned – skills improve with practice and feedback. If you're going to build a significant practice you'll need to build a team around you. You'll need to work effectively with others including peers, junior associates, law clerks and staff. Some people delegate effectively and efficiently and others don't.

After the recent conference of the Institute of Law Clerks of Ontario we asked the following questions:

- How might partners delegate more effectively?
- How might young lawyers, just starting out, learn to delegate early in their career?
- What are the common mistakes lawyers make when delegating assignments?
- What behaviours bring out the best in you?
- What are your stories about the best practices when it comes to delegation?



by Karen MacKay, MBA, CHRP
President

and Nick Jarrett-Kerr¹

From their responses and from my own experiences the following is critical tips list for delegating work effectively.

1. **Get to know the people on your team, their skills, experience and capability as well as their goals so you can give them exposure to stretch engagements.** Associates development is critical to nurturing and retaining the firm's future partners, however, there are times when a law clerk can deliver the work quickly, efficiently and cost effectively for the client. Partnering junior associates with senior law clerks on a client team may accelerate the associate's learning curve – particularly on the nuts and bolts of document production, affidavits of documents, court filings and corporate records administration.
2. **Provide instructions that are clear, concise and that indicate all critical dates and timelines.** How often do the engagement leaders in your firm hold team meetings where all who are involved in the file get a full briefing on the client and the matter; tasks are assigned; everyone knows who is on the team and who is responsible for what, and the critical dates? Whether you do this in writing or in a meeting is likely not critical. What is important is that everyone be fully briefed rather than working on their assignments out of context.
3. **Remain active in the engagement.** In 2006, Ed Wesemann of KermaPartners wrote an article entitled **Hitting the Wall** which profiled a lawyer whose annual revenue was in excess of \$10 Million. A lawyer who generates this level of practice must be a master at delegation and communication both with the team and with the clients. As Ed says, "no client wants to feel like they are getting second string" so the partner must remain active. As well, no associate wants to be left with responsibility for a matter that is over his or her head because when

something goes wrong, heads roll.

4. **Keep your door open.** In my experience, everyone working on your file wants to do the best job they can, both for you and for the client. Give them the support they need to accomplish that. As law clerk Betsy Spencer from Borden Ladner Gervais LLP in Ottawa said “it’s always great to work with a lawyer who is approachable and willing to discuss the file so that we are working as a team.”
5. **Empower members of your team.** “I think it is important to provide clear instructions and deadlines as well as the tools needed to perform the task. Don’t insult professionals by attempting to control the way they work. Respect the way they perform the task as long as they follow all pertinent legislation, policies and precedents, respect the instructions and honour the timelines.” Eileen Hanley, Supervising Paralegal at Osler, Hoskin & Harcourt in Montreal.
6. **Provide Timely Feedback.** When colleagues at all levels respect each other feedback comes naturally. Give kudos in public and criticize in private. Identify the problem and tackle the solution together. Feedback is a critical component to building capability and human capital. “Feedback delayed is feedback denied.”
7. **Debrief.** When a matter has been completed, take a few minutes with everyone involved in the engagement to summarize what was accomplished and what it meant to the client and what was learned. Truly successful firms learn from each engagement and share that knowledge. They gather the “know how” developed on the engagement and make it available through knowledge management and precedent systems.
8. **Provide recognition and respect.** When asked what behaviours bring out the best in you? Christina Christie of Borden Ladner Gervais in Ottawa put it succinctly: “recognition and respect bring out the absolute best in me” she said. How do you show respect? Through honest communication, fair and timely feedback, by empowering people, by making them feel part of a team.

Really talented professionals often evolve in one of two directions.

- First, *the Prima Donnas* who work alone or with a revolving team of juniors who leave as soon as they gain some experience. They don’t delegate effectively and they “hit the wall” in terms of the size of practice they can generate.
- *The Star Makers*, on the other hand, are those around whom talented professionals flourish and to whom clients are attracted.

Learning to delegate effectively is one of the pivotal skills that the Star Makers develop that puts them well ahead of the Prima Donnas. It’s your choice.

A word of thanks to the law clerks quoted in this article as well as to Monique Day of Fraser Milner Casgrain in Ottawa and to Sylvia Cheung of Aird & Berlis in Toronto. Everyone provided excellent information for this article.



Thank you.

1. Co-Author - Nick Jarrett-Kerr, a member of **Kerma Partners** advises law firms on leadership management strategy.

[Print PDF Version](#)