



WHELAN PARTNERS CONSULTING

As I've discussed, if leadership is like a painting, then hard skills are like the outline. You can effectively lead using hard skill leadership exclusively, the same way you can have a painting with only an outline. It may not be as beautiful, but it will communicate the idea. So, if you're a new leader, or aren't sure where to start, the same way you'd start with an outline before you start painting, starting with developing hard skills is the best.

If I asked you to think of a leader with great hard skills, you might picture a coach screaming at his team, or a military leader inspiring his troops to charge a hill. While those leaders may or may not possess great hard skills, the attributes of screaming or inspiring a group would be soft skills. Those relate to emotions and feelings, getting people to *want* to complete a task. Hard skill leadership is about effectively and strategically delegating tasks and is essentially unconcerned with whether the employees or team want to do it.

The two components of a well delegated task are that the request is specific and achievable. While that seems simple, delegating specific and achievable tasks requires focus and attention. For example, a request like, "I need you to do a better job of updating the tracker," may seem complete, but it's very likely the employee will be confused and upset by it. First, there's a problem with specificity. What does better mean? In what way was the employee failing at updating it? How soon do you expect this improvement? A more specific request would be, "I noticed that you haven't added our new clients to the tracker for the last two weeks. Will you get that updated by Friday, and every Friday going forward?"

There are three things that should be communicated when delegating in order to be specific. They are:

1. What outcome is desired? You should avoid using relative terms, like "better", "faster" or "more accurate". As a leader, it's your job to clearly define what better means. So rather than telling an employee "You need to get faster at producing these reports," you can say "You are doing about 3 reports an hour, and I need you to get up to around 5 an hour."
2. What method would you like the employee to use? The more you can allow employees to develop their own methods to complete a task, the more empowered they will be. However, there are times when a particular method will be necessary to the outcome, and if that's the case, you need to be clear about that with the employee.
3. When do you need it? Telling the employee that he or she needs to get to 5 reports an hour, is still not a complete instruction. "I need you to get up to producing 5 reports an hour within the next two weeks," is much more complete.

It's also important that any goals you give an employee are achievable. Assigning unachievable goals to employees is disempowering and over time can degrade an employee's confidence and subsequently, effectiveness. A goal is achievable if the employee has the resources and ability to do it. Resources

include things like, technology, raw materials and time. So, going back to our employee who needs to produce 5 reports an hour, he or she may need a faster computer or printer or more time to practice. As the leader, it's up to you to make sure those resources are available before assigning the task.

The other component is ability. If the employee has not had the proper training to complete a task, your job as a leader is to help them acquire the skills or give them a different role. Giving people impossible objectives is counterproductive. So, if our employee only types 30 words per minute, and would need to be able to do at least 50 words per minute in order to complete 5 reports an hour, then rather than asking them to increase the number of reports, you would come up with a strategy to increase their typing speed, like taking a typing class or giving them space to practice. If that's not possible, then you would need to assign the task to someone else. Obviously, if you need someone who can type 50 words per minute, you aren't hiring someone who can only type 30 in the first place.

Delegating effectively requires a greater awareness of your team's strengths and weaknesses. If you've been used to giving instructions reactively, as needed, you will likely find that being intentional about delegation is time consuming and challenging. But, if you make the investment of time upfront and work on being specific with your directives, that time will almost certainly be recaptured with more satisfied and productive employees.