



U.S. soldiers assigned to the 186th Brigade Support Battalion, 86th Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Mountain), Vermont National Guard, conduct a safety briefing with the crew of a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter prior to sling load training within the framework of Immediate Response 25 at Petrochori Training Area, Greece, 30 May 2025. (Photo by Davide Dalla Massara, U.S. Army; photo courtesy of DVIDS)

Developing Others through Delegation: A Leadership Imperative

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The speed of today's Army requires the team to be at its most efficient. The physical movement of troops, the pace of technological change, and the complexity of multidomain operations cause Army leaders to think about how they will deliberately develop everyone in their organization, not just the top performers. One method to develop

others on the job is through delegation. This article explores the concept of developing others through delegation, its benefits, and the role of leaders in making it a success. The article ends with recommendations for every leader to use delegation to drive change.

I. The Core Concept: Delegation as Development

Delegation is a leadership process of assigning tasks or responsibilities to subordinates while retaining accountability for the outcome. Research correlates delegation to the development of subordinates.¹ If done correctly, delegating allows a subordinate to take ownership of a task and to use that ownership to develop new skills and competencies. At the same time, delegation has the potential to increase a subordinate's self-confidence and let them know the leader trusts and respects them. According to a Gallup poll, subordinates take ownership of a task when they are allowed to be in control of completing the task. Being in control of a task results in a more engaged and pro-

the subordinate while the subordinate is working toward task completion. Doing this better ensures task success and employee development. While delegation is a complex task, the leader must keep in mind that the time spent developing subordinates frees calendar time for the leader and ultimately gives the Army a better soldier or Army civilian.⁶

II. Delegation in the Developmental Domains

Adding complexity to developing others through delegation are the Army's learning domains: institutional, operational, and self-developmental. The Army uses training, education, and experience to develop soldiers and Army civilians

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ductive subordinate.² While the research doesn't claim causation, many positive outcomes appear to be associated with delegation, enhancing both the subordinate and the organization.³

According to Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, delegation is more than assigning a task or responsibility to a subordinate.⁴ The decision to delegate must consider the knowledge, skills, and attitude of the subordinate. The leader must determine if the task is within the ability of the subordinate. The leader also determines how much autonomy to provide a subordinate. Under or overestimating these factors can work counter to both the development of the subordinate and the climate of the organization. Leaders should consider whether pre-delegation development of the subordinate may be required.⁵

Delegation includes nuance tasks as well. The leader must consider the degree of empowerment to provide the subordinate. Typically, the expression of empowerment lies within the guidelines and resources provided by the leader. Leaders should also consider giving periodic feedback to

across the domains. The most formal and traditional is the institutional. This domain comprises the Army's schools, Centers of Excellence, and colleges engaged in individual training and education. The operational domain involves training and experience occurring in Army's units and organizations as they prepare for the warfighting mission of the Army. This is the largest of the Army's learning domains and is engaged in collective training and real-world experiences. The self-development domain is the individual-oriented domain. In this domain the soldier or Army civilian chooses what to learn, how to learn it, and when to learn it. This domain engages training and education through online learning, on-the-job experience, and communities of interest and practice. Developing others through delegation occurs in all the domains.⁷

Institutional domain training and education is formal and employs the experiential learning model.⁸ It is comprised of soldiers and Army civilians teaching or attending classes live and virtually. It includes support staff and substantial organization



U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Daniel Bush with Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 68th Armor Regiment directs U.S. soldiers out of the landing zone as a UH-60 Black Hawk lands prior to Iraqi army live fire exercise on Tealeaf Island near Basra, Iraq, on 14 February 2011. Iraqi forces conducted live fire exercises while U.S. soldiers assigned to 36th Infantry Division and 3rd Advise and Assist Brigade, 4th Infantry Division were on hand to provide assistance. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Michael L. Casteel, U.S. Army; photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

headquarters. While lines of command are clearly defined, lines of communication are less defined. A subordinate may coordinate across multiple horizontal and vertical organizational lines to complete a delegated task.

Delegation in this domain requires substantial organizational knowledge on the part of the subordinate and more detailed guidance provided by the leader. Delegation has a unique opportunity in this domain as courses on leadership could include techniques and best practices in delegation. Delegation in this domain can cross over into the operational domain. This happens when a leader delegates a task to a subordinate who recently completed a course, and the task is a means of reinforcing the training received in the course.

In the classroom, instructors can delegate a part of the curriculum to a student to prepare and teach. This may be more possible if a student in the course has experience in the subject to be taught. Delegation in this domain requires more involvement on the part of the instructor to ensure learning outcomes are met. As with delegation in all domains, the risk to successful completion is offset by the instructor's guidance and feedback as the student prepares to teach. Research indicates

students who teach a portion of a course believe they learn better and are more likely to retain the information after the course.⁹

In the operational domain, development through delegation occurs in the context of real-world operations and missions. In this domain, leaders can use delegation to place a subordinate outside the normal operating environment to build comfort with new environments. In such a case, leaders have a responsibility to provide sufficient guidance to ensure task accomplishment. Development in this domain includes assigning tasks at an increasing level of responsibility. As tasks increase in importance, supervisors must accept their responsibility to provide feedback during task execution. Supervisors also have the responsibility to conduct an after action review with the subordinate and if necessary, address how failure is a developmental opportunity.

Leaders in the operational domain should endeavor to know what knowledge and skills the soldier or Army civilian learned in a recent course. Based on the course outcomes, the leader delegates a task requiring a subordinate to use the knowledge and skills learned. This type of delegation serves to reinforce the transfer of learning to the operational force. If the leader does not know the learning outcomes of his subordinates' recent training, the leader should contact the branch or Center of Excellence for officer professional military education courses. For educational enlisted courses, leaders can contact the NCO Center of Excellence. For Army civilian courses, leaders can contact the Army Management Staff College. For functional training, leaders should contact the branch or organization that conducted the training. The leader should also consider assigning tasks to reinforce the learning outcomes of a course. Doing this may reveal gaps in learning. Leaders should then conduct on-the-job training to close the gap. Similarly, proactive delegation can prepare a subordinate for a course they are scheduled to attend by assigning them a task to introduce the

subordinate to material in the course. Doing this should make a subordinate receptive to the training as they now understand its relevance.

Development through delegation in the self-development domain occurs when an assigned task requires fact finding or research. For example, a subordinate delegated the task to create a presentation on the current state of the Army leadership would require the subordinate to find current research on Army leadership, digest it, and turn it into a presentation. If the subordinate did not know how to use online software that may also take self-development to complete the assigned task. In such a case the leader needs to provide time and mentorship.

A leader could use the subordinate's individual development plan (IDP) to determine which tasks may align with the subordinate's goal for self-development. If a subordinate does not have a current IDP, coach the subordinate in the creation of an IDP. The effort on the part of the leader builds confidence in the subordinate. As the subordinate builds mastery in an area of study, the subordinate's initiative to take on tasks increases. Field Manual 6-22, *Developing Leaders*, has information for leaders on a number of developmental activities. Additionally, the Center for Army Leadership has a leader development kit on transforming individual development plans into powerful growth tools.

III. The Two-Way Benefit: Leader Development Through Delegation

The process of assessing a subordinate's competencies and delegating tasks that develop without overwhelming the subordinate can be complex. However, research suggests the benefits outweigh the time and effort involved in using delegation to develop others. One of the key benefits of delegation is the opportunity for team members to take on new challenges, develop new skills, and gain valuable experience.¹⁰ Delegation also helps to build confidence. When subordinates receive recognition for their work the subordinate's confidence to complete tasks increases.¹¹ At the same time, leaders who delegate buy back time to focus on tasks only they can do.¹² The mutual benefit

achieved in using delegation to develop others results in an improved organizational climate and if maintained could change the culture of the organization.

Another benefit of delegating is improved collaboration and the extension of influence beyond the chain of command. Leaders who set conditions enabling the subordinate to take responsibility for the successful completion of the task including accountability of task processes and outcomes demonstrate trust in the subordinate. Trust establishes the framework for the subordinate to exercise initiative and to make decisions. In the case of decision-making, leaders should consider communicating guidelines and desired outcome. The subordinate's ability to communicate and solve problems may also increase. These individual increases lead to team and organizational improvement. The leader who uses delegation to develop subordinates discovers that by leveraging the skills and expertise of their team members, the leader achieves more significant organizational outcomes.¹³

In addition to achieving organizational outcomes, delegation benefits the one who delegates. As a leader moves up in an organization, the leader must mentally transition from accomplishing tasks to developing and managing talent. While the subordinates develop, delegation allows time and reflection for a transformation to occur within the leader. Ultimately, as the leader develops delegation skills, the leader becomes better at providing constructive criticism, verifying task completion, and rewarding subordinates.¹⁴

IV. The Role of the Leader

For delegation to work effectively, leaders must set conditions for successful subordinate development. First, the leader assesses the subordinate's level of competence and commitment. The level of confidence and commitment determines the level and scope of the task that can be delegated to the subordinate. Next, the leader identifies a task to delegate. Leaders who desire to develop their subordinates through delegation must clearly communicate the task and purpose, objectives and expectations, and the desired outcome. Leaders must

also provide the guidance, authority, and support necessary to complete the task successfully.¹⁵

Leaders must give their subordinates the authority to make decisions and set conditions for successful task completion.¹⁶ According to a study by Blanchard, when leaders transfer a level of authority their subordinates are more likely to succeed and collectively more likely to build high-performing, cohesive teams.¹⁷ While the task is underway, the leader must also demonstrate trust in the subordinate. Leaders demonstrate trust by giving subordinates the ability to make decisions. The leader then offers feedback to help their team members succeed. One means of making feedback the norm within an organization is to encourage open communication and collaboration.¹⁸

Upon completion, leaders must recognize success and celebrate success organizationally. Acknowledging success further increases the subordinate’s self-confidence. As leaders continue delegating to develop, they should employ a continuous process improvement mindset to assess overall effectiveness and efficiency. Leaders need to be self-aware of their obstacles to delegation by asking themselves whether they inherently distrust their subordinates, tend toward perfectionism, or fear failure.¹⁹

V. Overcoming Barriers to Delegation

Many leaders struggle with delegation, from newly promoted to the most experienced who simply take on too much. Moving from an individual contributor to overseeing the efforts of others can be challenging. It requires leaders to spend their time differently and develop different skill sets this includes balancing workloads and avoiding overtasking subordinates. Some leaders may experience the opposite situation by delegating too much.

–ADP 6-22, para 7-10²⁰

Knight offers recommendations to leaders who have mental obstacles to delegating.²¹ First, identify what you are doing or thinking that is undermining your willingness to delegate. If you struggle with releasing tasks, start with smaller or less consequential tasks. In the same way you increase your subordinate’s comfort level by increasing the complexity

of the task, begin building your comfort level by delegating less consequential tasks. As you progress in delegating more consequential tasks, you learn delegating is a skill leaders can develop.

Leaders who are willing to delegate but who struggle with which tasks to delegate can use the Eisenhower matrix. Stephen Covey used President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s words to create a matrix with importance on one axis and urgency on the other (see figure 1).²² By placing tasks in one of four quadrants, the leader can discern which tasks they do and which tasks to delegate. Since the leader is the most experienced, tasks that are

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	<p>DO:</p> <p>TASKS WITH DEADLINES OR CONSEQUENCES</p>	<p>SCHEDULE:</p> <p>TASKS WITH UNCLEAR DEADLINES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO LONG-TERM SUCCESS</p>
NOT IMPORTANT	<p>DELEGATE:</p> <p>TASKS THAT MUST GET DONE BUT DON’T REQUIRE YOUR SPECIFIC SKILL SET</p>	<p>DELETE:</p> <p>DISTRACTIONS AND UNNECESSARY TASKS</p>

(Figure courtesy of Asana, <https://asana.com/id/resources/eisenhower-matrix>)

Figure 1. Eisenhower Matrix

both urgent and important—tasks that have stated completion dates and impact the work of others—should not be delegated. Tasks that are urgent but not critical and that do not require a specific skill or competence, can be delegated and the risk accepted by the leader.²³

If a task is not urgent but essential, the leader should schedule the task. As the leader builds the ability to delegate and the team builds their capability to accomplish, the leader can then schedule tasks over time to set conditions and provide guidance and direction, best enabling a subordinate to complete a delegated task, achieve a sense of accomplishment, and build self-confidence. If a task is not urgent and not important, Eisenhower’s

matrix suggests deleting the task; however, before deleting the task, the leader should determine if there is a subordinate who lacks self-confidence. A task that is not urgent or important may be the start to building a subordinate's self-confidence.

Once a leader has used the Eisenhower matrix to determine which tasks to delegate, the leader then develops the task sufficiently by addressing the following:

- Determine task scope; the end state should frame the task sufficiently and provide the scope and level of effort.
- Determine the complexity of the task, and which subordinates can work at that level of complexity.
- Determine likely barriers to success and provide clear instruction to the subordinate.
- Determine the resources and any enablers necessary to complete the task. Provide those to the subordinate.

- If the subordinate is new to accepting delegated tasks, check in with them at regular intervals to provide feedback and encouragement.

The next step is to select the subordinate as described earlier in this article.

In conclusion, developing others through delegation of tasks is a leadership imperative with organizational outcomes. Delegation allows teammates to take ownership of tasks, develop new skills, and gain valuable experience. Leaders play a role in making delegation successful by clearly communicating tasks and expectations, empowering team members, providing feedback and coaching, and letting go of control. By delegating effectively, leaders can build high-performing teams, achieve success, and develop the organizational skills and abilities needed, given the speed of today's Army. ■

Notes

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