

Management time: Who's got the monkey?

By William Oncken Jr and Donald L Wass

Harvard Business Review, November 1999

This landmark article examines why managers are often running out of time while their subordinates are running out of work!

Managers spend a part of their time doing the work their bosses have given them. They also spend some of their time attending to requests from peers. Then they spend time on activities which they either originate or agree to do. A good amount of time in this last category is taken up by subordinates. The focus of this article is how to manage "subordinate imposed time".

Most managers spend a significant amount of time dealing with the problems of their subordinates but without realizing it. The phenomenon manifests itself as follows. The manager is walking down the hall. A subordinate stops her and tells her there is a problem. The manager listens, gets involved, but is unable to take an immediate decision. She tells the subordinate she will think about the problem and get back to the subordinate. This is what the authors refer to as "allowing the monkey to leap from the subordinate's back to theirs." The manager is now working for the subordinate. Once the manager has many monkeys on her back, she will be spending most of her time doing the work of subordinates, instead of doing the work she should really be doing.

The authors have practical tips to offer on how to deal with this problem. Managers should tell their subordinates explicitly that when faced with a situation, they should not wait for instructions to come from the boss. The manager can listen to the subordinate for say 15 minutes to understand the problem. But the ownership should remain with the subordinate. The subordinates should be told clearly that they can exercise only one of three options:

- Recommend an action and ask for an approval
- Take an independent decision and keep the manager informed
- Take an independent decision and keep the manager informed through periodic reports.

To be able to take the monkeys off their backs, managers need to feel more secure. Managers often worry that if they allow subordinates to take too much initiative, their own importance, power and control will decline.

In his commentary on the article, Stephen Covey mentions that, when managers delegate, they have a feeling of deficiency. That makes it hard for them to feel genuinely happy when their subordinates successfully accomplish the tasks given to them. Clearly, a change in mindset is needed. That requires deep reflection and developing a sense of integrity on what is good for the organization in the long run.

It is also important to understand why employees try to hand off their monkeys. They could be doing so due to lack of motivation or skill. So, managers should coach their team members and help them develop problem-solving skills. This process of grooming team members initially consumes time, but, in the long run, frees up the bandwidth of the manager to accomplish more important things.

Effective delegation is not possible without trust. The subordinate should feel confident that it is safe to make mistakes. Otherwise, the fear of failure will prompt them to keep handing over the monkey to their managers.