

# Navigating the Murky Waters of Delegation

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In the last week, I've interviewed three different volunteer engagement professionals about volunteer retention as their organizations are in various stages of reopening and recovery from the pandemic-related restrictions on volunteer engagement. Interestingly, they each had different stories to tell, yet they all shared one strategy: All are engaging volunteers as leaders in new ways to help with retention. Whether engaging volunteers as team leads in a blood bank

canteen, tapping long-time event volunteers to serve on event leadership committees, or empowering retention teams to check-in on new and veteran volunteers by phone, each has successfully built leadership opportunities into their retention efforts.

These conversations underscored a truth that we have long observed: Engaging volunteers as leaders is a great way to build capacity beyond what staff alone can achieve. Yet, this “truth” is also hard for many of us to put into practice. Why? Because it's hard to let go of control. Many people believe that engaging volunteer leaders means giving up control over the results of the work. But that's just not true. We do not have to give up control over results because whenever we delegate to another person (paid staff or volunteer), we should negotiate and agree upon results in advance. For example, the blood bank canteen team leads may be responsible for ensuring efficient operations of the canteen and creating a welcoming, positive environment for the volunteers on their shift (thereby increasing the chances that those volunteers will return). Depending on the terms of the delegation, we may have to let go of *how* the work gets done (e.g., it's up to each team leader to create their own welcoming environment). But *results*? That should be a negotiated agreement (e.g., if surveyed, at least 85% of canteen volunteers would report that they felt welcomed and supported by their team lead).

Intended results should be communicated in position descriptions, work plans, training, and support. But the level of delegation is equally important. I am particularly fond of the model of [5 Levels of Delegation](#).

**Level 1: Do as I say.** I have researched the options, determined the path forward, and expect you to do exactly as I instruct.

**Level 2: Research and report.** I expect you to do the research and then report back to me with the information. While we may discuss it, I will decide and instruct on future actions.

**Level 3: Research and recommend.** I would like you to research the issue, consider the options, and then come back with a recommendation. I remain the decision-maker and may or may not agree with your recommendation. Either way, I will decide and instruct on next steps.

**Level 4: Decide and inform.** I trust you to do the research, make an informed decision, and keep me updated along the way. Communicate regularly with me so I can, in turn, keep others informed.

**Level 5: Act independently.** You are empowered to research and act independently. I do not need updates.

If you think back to a time when a delegation didn't go well (and I suspect it won't be hard to come up with at least one example, whether you were the delegator or the delegate), chances are pretty good that the problem stemmed from different understandings of the level of delegation. Perhaps the delegates assumed they were empowered at a Level 4 (Decide and Inform), when the delegator had been operating under a Level 2 (Research and Report).

When engaging volunteer leaders, having a conversation about these levels is not difficult, especially *if* they occur at the start of the work. And doing so means much smoother sailing along the way. However, it's never too late to have the conversation.

If you find yourself in the rocky waters of delegation and feeling uncomfortable about the amount of information you are getting from volunteer leaders, then have a conversation to make sure you are all operating on the same delegation level.

If you – or your colleagues – are reluctant to engage volunteer leaders, walking through this model will help build support for sticking a toe in the waters of delegation. Many people assume that engaging volunteer leaders means a Level 5 – that the volunteer will be acting completely independently, yet other levels exist. Use this model to help colleagues understand that they can start with lower levels of delegation and either stay there or, after building trust, move up levels over time. The results will not only be smoother working relationships, but greater capacity as a professional, a team, and an organization overall.