
A Principal's Guide to Custodial Supervision

by John Eller

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Chapter 3

Delegating Tasks and Assignments

In most instances, custodial staff members want to do a good job keeping the building clean and presentable. Sometimes, however, they run into difficulties meeting our expectations. These difficulties can arise for a variety of reasons. In this chapter, we will look at the process of effectively delegating tasks to help improve your custodial staff members' abilities to meet your expectations. In this chapter, you will learn the following:

- How to effectively delegate jobs and tasks to custodial staff members.
- The importance of providing a clear vision for the end product of an assignment.
- How to follow up on delegated jobs while providing support.
- The best ways to help people who struggle and make mistakes.

What Does It Mean to Delegate?

Delegation is one of the most basic leadership tasks. But it's also one of the most misused and misunderstood. When delegation is done correctly, staff members are more competent in completing their assignments and ultimately succeed in reaching the expectations of the supervisor. Notice how the custodian in the following example is able to be successful as a result of the actions of her supervisor.

Phyllis, the night custodian, has been asked by her principal, Sheila, to set up the auditorium for a night program. Sheila explains to Phyllis that she wants to get 200 people in the auditorium but needs to ensure that everyone has an unobstructed view of the front stage. Phyllis set up the chairs and then tested the view from various locations to make sure everyone could see. In the end, the program was a success due in part to the seating arrangement that was set up by Phyllis.

On the surface, this example may seem frivolous. After all, why didn't Sheila just tell Phyllis exactly how to set up the auditorium rather than describe the outcome and leave the details to Phyllis? Wouldn't it be easier just to provide Phyllis with an exact map and not take the chance that she might botch the setup of the room?

In this example, Sheila chose to delegate because she was interested in helping Phyllis become more independent and develop her problem-solving skills. The use of delegation is a long-term way to help Phyllis learn these skills.

A Delegation Model

When delegating tasks, it helps to use a process. Principals have found the following model helpful when delegating assignments to their employees:

1. Think through the job assignment; identify all the components needed to do the job well.
2. Think about those who may be taking on the task, and identify their skill sets. Look for a match between their skills and those required for the job.

3. Talk to the person you are interested in delegating the assignment to. Communicate how his or her strengths will fit the task.
4. Provide a clear “picture” of the completed job or task, including the potential timeline. Have the person describe the end product in his or her own words so that you know the person understands what is required.
5. Teach the skills that are needed to do the task well. Make sure he or she understands the steps involved in the task.
6. Set up a schedule to check his or her progress during the course of the task or project.
7. Be sure to give the person positive feedback about his or her efforts.

In the example where the auditorium setup was delegated to Phyllis, Sheila (the principal) used this model to help her draw up a plan. Specifically, Sheila:

- Thought through the assignment carefully and determined which member of her custodial staff would have the skills that best matched the needs of the assignment. Phyllis had been able in the past to handle jobs on her own with minimal direction. She had also attended her own children’s programs and clearly understood the need for everyone to be able to see.
- Clearly communicated the desired end product to Phyllis regarding the physical arrangement of the auditorium. She also checked to make sure that Phyllis understood her directions by asking her to repeat them back to her.
- Established a time when she would check on the setup of the auditorium to make sure it was being put together according to plan. This check-up was established for a time well before the actual program so that if the room setup was not correct, there would still be time left to make the necessary adjustments.
- Gave Phyllis specific feedback about her performance so that she understood why she was successful in her efforts.

Putting all of the components in place using the delegation model helped ensure that the assigned task was completed successfully. Sheila made it a practice to utilize the components of the delegation model with all of her custodial staff members. Over time, she was able to see real growth in their abilities to work more productively and independently to complete the tasks that she delegated. She also taught the delegation model to her head custodian, who is also growing more adept at delegating tasks to his team members.

The following chart is an example of how another principal, Len, used the delegation model to assign Joan the task of cleaning up the flowerbed in the front of the school and making sure it looked good all summer.

Delegation Component	Action or Plan
<p>1. Think through the job assignment; identify all the components needed to do the job well.</p>	<p>Components needed for a clean flowerbed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All weeds removed. • Trash and garbage removed. • Edges of the bed trimmed. • Bushes and plants trimmed to an appropriate height and level of thickness. • Good balance of plants. <p>Personal work traits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to work on a task that needs continued maintenance. • The ability to work alone. • The ability to work on a project for which the person may not get feedback unless it's done incorrectly.
<p>2. Think about those who may be taking on the task, and identify their skill sets. Look for a match between their skills and those required for the job.</p>	<p>People with the skills to do the job:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ed • Joan <p>Best match of skills to the job of keeping the bed clean and looking good:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joan
<p>3. Talk to the person you are interested in delegating the assignment to. Communicate how his or her strengths will fit the task.</p>	<p>Set up meeting with Joan to talk about the flowerbed job; let her know why I chose her for the assignment.</p>
<p>4. Provide a clear “picture” of the completed job or task, including the potential timeline. Have the person describe the end product in his or her own words so that you know the person understands what is required.</p>	<p>When the flowerbed is completed, it should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be clear of weeds and trash. • Have an even balance of plants and flowers. • Stay clean and clear of trash. • Continue to be trimmed. <p>Have Joan explain in her own words the final outcome for the task.</p>
<p>5. Teach the skills that are needed to do the task well. Make sure he or she understands the steps involved in the task.</p>	<p>Schedule a time to go out with Joan to the flowerbed to show her what I want it to look like when the task is completed. Since Joan already knows how to do yard work, I don't need to explain that part of the assignment.</p>
<p>6. Set up a schedule to check on his or her progress during the course of the task or project.</p>	<p>Ask Joan to report back to me when she thinks she is finished. I'll make it a point to stop by and notice her progress when I think she is about halfway through the project.</p>
<p>7. Be sure to give the person positive feedback about his or her efforts.</p>	<p>I'll make it a point to enter the building from the flowerbed side at least once a week during the summer. I'll write Joan at least two notes thanking her for her efforts.</p>

As you can see from this example, Len has carefully thought through the assignment and is working to make sure that Joan is successful. Once this project is launched, Len can devote his attention to other matters at the school. Over time, Len will be able to streamline his delegations as he becomes more proficient in using the delegation model. A blank copy of this form (3.1) has been provided at the end of the chapter.

Providing Clear Directives

For the most part, we work with custodial staff members who are really interested in doing what is best for the school. They work hard to balance multiple priorities while sometimes trying to figure out what we really want them to do. As you prepare to give your custodians assignments, be sure that your directions are clear. Notice how Adam, a high school principal, gives one of his custodians, Mel, a directive to take care of a problem at the front entrance of the school:

“Mel, when I came in to the school today, I noticed that the rugs were curling up at the front entrance. This could cause people to trip as they enter the school. Please stop what you are working on now and find a way to address this problem. After the lunch period, check the entrance again to make sure that the problem stays fixed. Let me know this morning if you can’t fix the problem so that we can figure out what we need to do to take care of it. Thank you.”

In this example, it’s easy to see that Adam thought the problem was a priority that needed to be addressed right away. He was clear and direct in his request to Mel. By being clear and direct, Adam helped Mel be successful with the task.

Let’s look at the situation from another angle. We’ll use the same situation, but this time Adam’s directive will not be quite so clear. Look for the potential problems that could occur as a result of this conversation:

“Mel, when I came to work this morning, I noticed that the rugs were curling up at the front entrance. If you get a chance, could you check on this sometime today? Thank you.”

In this second example, Adam didn’t communicate his desire to get the situation taken care of immediately. Mel might not think that the issue is a priority and that he can address it when he has time. Later, if Adam walks by the front entrance and sees the same curly rugs, he might get angry at Mel.

As you think about providing directives to your custodial staff members, be sure to communicate your requests and the priority level of the assignment clearly. This will let them know whether they should stop what they are doing to complete your new task. Keep the following in mind:

- Clearly describe the task that you want the custodian to undertake.
- Always communicate the priority level of the new task or assignment.

Delegation of Custodial Tasks Template

Form 3.1

Delegation Component	Action or Plan
<p>1. Think through the job assignment; identify all the components needed to do the job well.</p>	
<p>2. Think about those who may be taking on the task, and identify their skill sets. Look for a match between their skills and those required for the job.</p>	
<p>3. Talk to the person you are interested in delegating the assignment to. Communicate how his or her strengths will fit the task.</p>	
<p>4. Provide a clear “picture” of the completed job or task, including the potential timeline. Have the person describe the end product in his or her own words so that you know the person understands what is required.</p>	
<p>5. Teach the skills that are needed to do the task well. Make sure he or she understands the steps involved in the task.</p>	
<p>6. Set up a schedule to check his or her progress during the course of the task or project.</p>	
<p>7. Be sure to give the person positive feedback about his or her efforts.</p>	