



# The 3 U's of Accountability

## The Mindset Difference Between Delegation and Returning Authority

Holding people accountable is one of the most challenging aspects of leadership. Most leaders struggle because they don't have a simple, proven and powerful way. The following provides the keys to how you hold others accountable.

What you need to know: PART I – Every leader must be aware of the vital distinction between delegation and returning authority. PART II – Decide on one of three clarifying mindsets to quickly apply to your world and immediately up your leadership effectiveness.

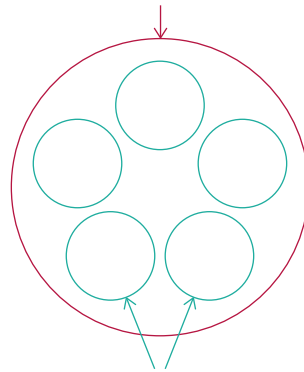
### **PART I** What is the difference between delegation and returning authority?

In the simplest of terms, delegation is when you assign a task with which you may be familiar, either consciously or unconsciously (for example, the work may have been part of your previous job), and returning authority is when you explicitly think about what you are uncertain, unwilling or are unable (3 U's of Accountability) to do.

The distinction of delegation is one of mindset; specifically, you believe you know how to complete the task to reach a certain desired outcome. When the person assigned does the task and

### Diagram: Old and new model of leadership

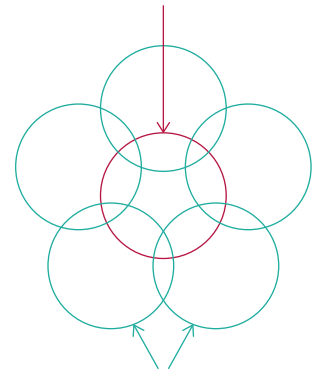
Leader's Role used to be knowing all of their teams role/work



Team Members



Now: Leader's Role



Team Members

brings it back, you critique it and request certain changes in X way or Y form. The person then edits to the X way and Y form, but you still don't approve of the outcome, so you send them off for one more round of edits, only to find that you still want additional changes. Who then really owns the work? YOU do, for you are embedded with HOW the work is getting done. This doesn't mean you can't coach them, but we will address this later.



## What is returning authority?

Returning authority is when you are clear, as the leader, about who holds the real authority in getting the task at hand done (whether it is achieving high performance, accomplishing a task, or dealing with a conflict). And it is NOT you, it is the person who is DOING the work to achieve the desired outcome. When you hold someone accountable, what you are really doing is holding THEM accountable for the DOING and achieving the outcome. YOUR role is providing the clarity of **what you need the OUTCOME or RESULT to be.**

Most leaders focus on the actions or the HOW something will get done. This is delegation – when you think YOU know best for the HOW/DOING. And this is why leaders tend to take on extra work, because they haven't defined the clarity of the outcomes they own compared to the outcomes their direct report owns.

The challenge here, and the typical gap, is that you haven't made the outcome clear, or defined what A+ performance means to you, and so the person assigned to the task is left guessing.

When you are returning authority, you must think about and define in your own mind what you are uncertain of, unable or unwilling to do or not do.

You may be thinking, "As a leader, I need to be certain, willing and able!" But the reality is that no one is able to be all of those things all of the time. In fact, the best leaders are clear about their own abilities and boundaries, specifically what they can and should be doing as well as what they expect others to be held accountable for delivering. Words matter here. Notice that I didn't write 'what others should be held accountable to DO'. And herein lies the challenge and opportunity. Delegation is the focus on believing you KNOW best, even if you are not aware of it. Returning authority is when you are explicitly clear about the OUTCOME or RESULT and clear about what you are uncertain, unable or unwilling to DO<sup>1</sup>.

**The bottom line: accountability starts with you and your own mindset.**



## PART II

### Three Clarifying Mindsets - the 3 U's: Uncertain, Unable, Unwilling

The 3 U's are a way for you to get clear about how you are going to hold someone accountable for a task, performance level or fixing a problem. The first and most important step is that you have to get clear and choose **ONE** of the following three U's.

What are you **UNCERTAIN** about? Is this person more knowledgeable than you, perhaps closer to the client and with a greater understanding of their systems?

What are you **UNABLE** to do that the other person can do? Perhaps they live closer to the situation or they are training with certain technology that you don't have. Perhaps you don't have the time because of a conflict or it is their job (not yours) to do X.

What are you **UNWILLING** to do? Perhaps you have hired them for X, when you used to do that task with your hands tied behind your back. But you now have to manage others, or be more strategic, and must shift how you use your time. Here you must declare to yourself first, draw the line, and literally think about what you are explicitly unwilling to do.

You only need to choose one that you really feel you can commit to. Choose one and take the time to think through the details, specifically what are you uncertain, unable or unwilling to **DO**? Get clear for yourself first.

And yes, it is great for you to coach along the way by asking questions versus leaving them until the due date. Note that here, coaching means **ASKING** them questions to elicit **THEIR** ideas on how to accomplish the task. You can share how you have done it in the past, **BUT** you need to **ALSO** ask "What other options or ways do you see approaching this?". Asking this cedes ownership of the task to **THEM**, placing the accountability squarely on their shoulders.

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#### Resources:

1) *Research from 20+ year longitude study about what thoughts differentiate average from superior leaders; see article: [Inside the Mind of a World Class Leader](#), page 4.*

*Adapted from Interactive Leadership™, Burnham Rosen Group*