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How to cite:

McCartney, Kieran (2022). Reflecting on the Importance of Managing Time and Delegation in Sport and Fitness Environments: Reflective Thoughts from a Practitioner. Unpublished.

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Version: Submitted Version

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Reflecting on the Importance of Managing Time and Delegation in Sport and Fitness Environments: Reflective Thoughts from a Practitioner.

'Let's step into the Tardis and manage time'

My name is Kieran. Once upon a time, I was a student. After graduating I began working in a variety of managerial roles in various industries but particularly in Sport, Fitness and Coaching and Health and Education across the public, private voluntary and community sectors. These roles have included Fitness Coach; Sports Coach; Health Club Manager; Health Promotion Manager; Active Lifestyle Development Officer and Management Consultancy.

Introduction

Time management and delegation are two distinctly different aspects of management and leadership, and they are also, inextricably intertwined. Time management deals with your ability to manage your own time and if you're in a management or leadership role it will also involve helping to manage the time of others (Mullins, 2007). Delegation is the art of entrusting the completion of a task to another person(s) within certain parameters. During the process of this chapter, I will reflect upon key learning points that I have accumulated through my experience as a manager and leader in the sport, exercise, fitness, and health sectors. I will also incorporate some reflective learning and practice and demonstrate to you how self-awareness and reflective practice have influenced my development as a leader and manager. Firstly, we will begin with a situation I encountered whilst managing a health, sports, and fitness complex.

The background

Some years after I graduated, I was appointed as a consultant working for a national chain of health clubs. I was given the remit of taking a health club that had been performing poorly and turning it around. The club had suffered from a series of financial, operational and health and safety problems. Ultimately, these challenges had resulted in a reduction in the number of customers who were willing to use the facility. The facility was also succumbing to its age and cracks and tears were beginning to appear in the building and on the equipment. Needless to say, members were not happy.

In my first week, in the job, I spent most of my time talking to the staff and customers. I did this by actively using the facilities and placing myself in the position of the customer. I would often chat to customers and as they became aware that I was the manager they would tell me what they liked and didn't like about the facilities and services. I often asked one key question and that was:

"If I could grant you one wish in relation to this facility and its staff, what would that be?"

Inevitably, this question brought a variety of answers that included: improving cleanliness; fixing broken equipment and ensuring member complaints were addressed. Interestingly, when I asked the staff the same question, they would often return the same answers. For instance, they would often complain that the facility was not clean enough, they would like more customers to visit the complex, and they would like to have broken equipment fixed and ideally get some new equipment.

It became very clear that the staff and the customers wanted the same thing and in striking similarity neither the customers nor the staff knew how this could be done. I also discovered that a lack of skill development among the staff had created an environment where only one or two people knew what was going on in the facility and the direction of where things were taking.

It was at this point in my new appointment that I reflected upon my previous experiences of management.

Reflecting on what I learnt: 'Hands in pockets'

After I graduated, I began my first real job as a manager for an international organisation. After the first two months in the role my line manager decided to teach me the benefits of delegation. They explained that delegation was not about laziness but that it was about creating an environment where the leader/manager can get things done. They also indicated that it was an opportunity to empower staff members. The empowerment my manager was referring to could be closely aligned to Houston's (2017) definition of empowerment. This meant allowing staff to take control of their own career development by incorporating them in the decision-making process and training them appropriately. To help me to fully understand the art of communication and delegation my manager instructed me, at the start of my shift, to put my hands in my pockets and not to take them out of my pockets until I completed my shift. It begged the obvious question and I asked it –

“How will they get things done and do my work?”

The reply was simple –

“You will get things done through other people”

Although they may not have realised it, they had defined what delegation involves which is getting things done through other people. To allow it to apply to a leader the definition needs to be tweaked slightly. A leader is someone who can encourage people to do things that they may not otherwise have done. My job, on that shift, was to ensure the smooth running of the facility. Therefore, I had to encourage staff to do things that they might not have otherwise occurred to them or they thought were not part of their role. With my hands in my pockets, I proceeded to manage the staff assigned to me. I wasn't even allowed to pick up pieces of paper that littered the ground. I had to communicate with my staff and encourage them to ensure that the area was clean, customers' needs were being served and that there were no health and safety concerns.

That day I also learned something else about delegation. A team is comprised of several different people (leaders, managers and staff) who have a variety of different skills. The reason why organisations have teams of managers and teams of staff is because no one person can do it all. No one person has access to the entire skill set that is needed to run a business, sports facility or even a sports team successfully.

Let us get back to my challenge at the health club. I had spent a week observing how things are done around the sport and fitness facility I was managing. How things are done at the health club can typically be defined as the culture that was present there as Bower (1966) explains. I had spoken to customers and staff members and discovered that both groups shared the same common interests and concerns. I had also discovered that only a handful of staff members knew the overall 'big picture' of way things had gone wrong.

The first thing I did was to take the job descriptions of each staff member and review them. I then reviewed the structure of the health club. Reporting directly to me was a sales manager, a fitness manager, a front of house manager, a spa and beauty manager and an assistant manager. Each of these managers had between three and six staff who also reported to them. To ensure smooth communication, I held a meeting with all the staff and explained the current situation. I outlined that membership at the health club was declining, the facility was ageing badly and combined with some health and safety concerns these factors were seriously detrimental to progress. At the meeting, I advised all the staff that I would be asking them for their views and setting them objectives against their job descriptions. I also told them,

"I really value your opinion and I need your input because I don't have the detailed knowledge you possess in relation to customers and other areas. However, once I receive all your opinions and ideas the final decision will be mine to make".

The following day I held a series of one-to-one meetings with each of the managers and during these meetings each manager set their own objectives, based upon their job description. The objectives that they had set themselves were based around four key areas:

- Improving profit
- Improving cleanliness
- Improving service
- Improving health and safety

All the staff now had an overview of the challenges facing the facility and I never directly set the objectives for each manager instead, they set their own objectives. I then did something that each individual manager seemed shocked to hear when I suggested it. I asked each of them to repeat the process that I had gone through with them with every member of their team. Below, I have outlined an example of a conversation that took place during these meetings.

Me: So, you have set your objectives and you feel comfortable that these can be achieved?

Manager: Yes.

Me: Is there anything that would stop you from achieving your objectives?

Manager: What do you mean?

Me: Well, do you have enough time and resources to make sure you can achieve these?

Manager: I never have enough time to get everything that I need to get done, done.

Me: Why do you think that is?

Manager: Because my team don't know what they're doing.

Me: And why is that?

Manager: Because they don't know what to do.

Me: And why is that?

Manager: Because I haven't trained them.

Me: How could you correct that?

Manager: Well, I could, as you have suggested, conduct monthly one-to-one meetings with them where I would set the objectives against what I need to achieve. It would also act as an opportunity for me to communicate the direction in which we need to go and teach them how to get there.

Me: Brilliant! That's a great idea.

I then went on to explain to each individual manager that they could not be present in the facility 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. I would often tell them, "Not even Doctor Who can create time, he only manages it". I would then go on to explain that for me to have enough time to take care of everything that needed to be done I needed to be able to delegate some of my responsibilities onto others who I could trust to complete them. This also had the benefit of helping the managers to understand the wider challenges and opportunities that faced the health club. It also offered the opportunity for the managers to advance their own careers by learn new skills and knowledge that they didn't know before through taking control of their own teams.

Similarly, as each manager conducted their one-to-one objective meetings with their staff the same process was repeated, and individual staff members obtained the same benefits. I reminded myself, that to be successful I could only be successful through my team and when the team was successful, we were all successful. I could not be present in the facility 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and 365 days a year. The only way I could ensure that my presence or absence from work did not affect customer service was by setting clear objectives and delegating tasks, a process McHale (2011) indicates is management by objectives (MBO). This gave me more time to concentrate on the bigger picture and address smaller issues as they arose.

So, within my first few weeks in the job I had spent time communicating with staff and customers. I had asked both sets of people for their opinions and ideas and asked them what they thought was wrong and how it could be improved. As a person I do not have all the skills, time and resources that are necessary to make the changes that are required for the health and sports club to be successful. Therefore, I must rely on other people. As a result, I delegate tasks to others, and I ask those who are also responsible for other members of staff to follow the same process. This helps to ensure that we communicate, cooperate and coordinate things together. Delegation is also useful in helping to prevent the loss of knowledge from your sports team or business as I will explain below.

Mistakes are inevitable but how we respond is important

Knowledge is not easily replaced, unlike physical equipment. I learnt this from a previous position where I had also managed some health clubs for a multinational company. Shortly after commencing work for this organisation, a member of staff came into my office and handed in their resignation. The reason they had resigned was because they felt that their career was going nowhere, and they had found an opportunity to progress their career in another organisation. I expressed my sadness that they had decided to leave and wished them well for the future. I also took the opportunity to ensure a 'handover' took place. A 'handover' is a process where a member of staff who is leaving will help to train another member of staff ensuring there are no gaps in service provision. It was during this 'handover' period that I had also previously booked some parental leave as my wife was expecting our first baby.

When I returned to work, I discovered that the 'handover' had not taken place. The person who was to assume the duties of the departing staff member had been off sick, so could not be trained. No one had taken the opportunity to arrange training for another staff member because they were not sure what to do. The situation was not one that could have been predicted and even if could have been predicted only the person who was to assume the duties from the staff member who resigned had the space and capacity to adopt their role. Here, lays another life lesson in relation to delegation and time management: The delegation of tasks helps you to manage your time and is also important for 'succession planning'. However, succession planning takes time and is difficult to achieve at short notice as my example above illustrates.

'Succession planning', as explained by Granger (2014, P. 16), is the principal of assuming that no one stays in your organisation for ever. Therefore, you need to make contingency plans to ensure that when someone leaves the knowledge that they take with them is not completely lost. I was left pondering; if someone had taken the time to invest training and effort into the staff member who had resigned and further empowered them to make decisions and create flexibility and exercise their judgement more often this would have enabled their professional agency and they may never have left.

Reflecting on what I have learnt- learn the job of the person above you teach your job to the person below you.

One of the key lessons I learned and pass on to staff is to learn the job of the person above you and teach your job to the person below you. Then get others to do the same so you don't lose the knowledge in your team. This idea came from my interest in history combined with having previously observed the impact that the loss of a team member can have upon an organisation. In a role I previously occupied I observed that, on one occasion, the most senior manager in the business had to take time off due to illness. In their absence, the provision of the service to the customers was negatively affected. It became apparent that the manager was the key knowledge holder in that facility. The staff were very dependent upon their leadership to the extent of that when they took time off, as a result of the illness, key decisions were not taken, and responsibilities were not clearly outlined which had a negative impact upon team morale and ultimately the provision of the service for the customers.

The resolution to this, at the time, was not completely clear to me until I read a book about the Vietnam War. In this book, a key battle that had been fought during the war and its success was largely attributed to the commander's approach to training his soldiers. This approach hinged on a realistic problem i.e. if an officer or other leader was injured or killed in combat who would make the decisions in order to ensure the survival of the other soldiers. The commanding officer decided that privates should learn the job of sergeants, sergeants should learn the job of Lieutenants and Lieutenants the job of Captains et cetera. Similarly, sergeants should teach their jobs to privates and Lieutenants to sergeants etc. This meant that if someone was unable to make a decision as a result of a loss of a key person there was a clear line of succession to ensure that the skills and knowledge held by that person was not lost in the heat of combat. So, by reflecting and working upon my 'awareness of self' I recognised that occasionally, mistakes will happen. But it's better to lose a piece of equipment that can be replaced than the experience of a good team member.

During your career where you may act as a leader and/or manager in sport, exercise, or fitness it is important to remember that mistakes will happen. No one comes to work to deliberately make a mistake. We work in a business of risk. There are risks every day. There is a risk that customers will leave, there is a risk that someone might get injured and there is a risk that someone may be late for work or miss a day due to illness. When you delegate a task to a team member ensure that they have enough time, resources, and training to be successful. Let them feel part of the overall plan and know you can be successful together. No-one knows everything, no one has all the time in the world, and no one can be present in one place all the time – that's why we have teams of managers and staff.

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