Leadership to the Bone—
Mastering the Art of Delegation

Donna Suter

Without the skeletal system, humans are reduced to fleshy Jell-O. You don’t have to possess the knowledge of Temperance Brennan (from the TV series “Bones”) to know this.

Leadership without strong delegation can also be a little soft. (On the other hand, barking orders, giving ultimatums, and making unrealistic requests can mean your opticians are using their version of this Southern phrase behind your back, “She might be pretty on the outside, but she’s ugly to the bone.”)

Without mastering the art of delegating, you will feel stressed and overloaded. Because the amount of revenue generated in an optical is finite and there are only so many tasks you can complete in a work week, it’s understandable that optical management might be at the bottom of that never-ending to-do list.

That’s what makes delegation such an excellent skill for administrators with dispensaries. An optician licensed by the American Board of Opticianry is typically proficient in the core skills of assisting patients in the dispensing of prescription lenses and the selection of eyewear. Therefore, these optical tasks are already a part of your opticians’ normal job requirements. Think about delegating tasks that involve sharing more “top-level” information and the execution of tasks that involve critical thinking. For example, projecting how net would be impacted by a 5% increase in sales and suggesting three ways to achieve that goal in the next six months would allow your opticians to learn and move toward greater buy-in into a

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critical goal that aligns with overall practice profitability.

**Where to Start**

There are three optical management tasks I recommend that the administrator or owner of the practice delegate:

1. customer service,
2. increasing gross revenues, and
3. achieving a higher net.

While it is not uncommon to find opticians with a natural talent for one, or perhaps two, of these management tasks, it is impossible to excel in all three without mentoring or formal training. So delegating also involves providing adequate training, being available for questions and answers, and providing opportunities for progress checks (and for rework as necessary).

It’s important to understand that people fail at delegation because they do not understand the amount of up-front skill-building it takes. After all, you look at P&Ls almost daily and are successful because you can generate charts and graphs that monitor customer service, gross, and practice net in real time. The critical question becomes, “Is it a good use of your time to perform these services for the dispensary?”

**Deciding to Delegate**

Consider the following when deciding to whom you will delegate:

1. **The experience, knowledge and skills of the individual as they apply to the delegated task.**
   - What knowledge, skills, and attitude does the person already have?
   - Do you have time and resources to provide any training needed?

2. **The individual’s preferred work style.**
   - How independent is the person?
   - What does he or she want from his or her job?
   - What are his or her long-term goals and professional interests and how do these align with the work proposed?

3. **The current workload of this person.**
   - Does this person have time to take on more work?
   - Will your delegating this task require reshuffling of other responsibilities and workloads?

You might feel it is easier to dictate your budgets and sales goals to the optical; however, there are reasons to delegate the responsibility for determining these goals to them instead:

- First, if you can manage the optical, there is a high probability that your skills are better used developing new revenue streams for the practice. Therefore, by doing the work of managing the optical yourself, you are failing to make the best use of your time.
- Second, by meaningfully involving optical employees in financial management, you develop their financial skills and abilities. This means, eventually, you can delegate the task with a high degree of confidence that it will be done well and with much less involvement from you.

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store and you will find it is not very expensive.

- We ceased serving a post-operative snack 10 years ago. Patients receive such minimal sedation, and NPO standards and safety parameters have changed dramatically. Our patients are not in Stage I and II PACU for a lengthy period of time. We offer them coffee, tea, water, or juice in a six-ounce cup. If a snack is needed for a particular patient, we have them available. We give each of our patients a satisfaction survey, and I can only recall one related comment since we made this change. This decision was not fiscally based but rather time-oriented: It can take an elderly patient a great deal of time to eat a snack. As operative times shorten and patient volumes increase, you need to pay close attention to the details related to things like timing in the post-operative areas. Patient safety and compliance with your Discharge Readiness standards, of course, is important in all these decisions.

- Because the patient just has "light" sedation, we have a side chair in each of our PO bays. When patients are ready, we have them sit in the chair and give them a packet of saltines or graham crackers and juice or an eight-ounce can of soda while the family pulls the car up to the discharge door. Many times patients prefer to take their snack and drink with them, which keeps our discharge time short and the patients satisfied. If they stay to eat, it doesn’t take long to consume because there are only two crackers in the pack.
Strategies for Success

Delegation allows you to make the best use of your time and skills, and it helps other people on the team grow and develop to reach their full potential. Opticians are closest to optical productivity and are best suited for the task because they have the most intimate knowledge of the detail of everyday work. This also increases optical efficiency and helps to develop leaders.

Execute the following strategies to delegate successfully:

1. Develop a plan for consistent and continual growth. What you set is what you get. For example, reduce cost of goods (COG). Build a pattern of positive expectations for optical employees by keeping score. Keeping score motivates when expectations are well defined. Count the number of frames special ordered for patients. (Shipping contributes to COGs. Selling from in-house selection could reduce COG by 1% or more.) On the other hand, when you wait for the annual performance review to point out high shipping, you may be met with surprise, shock, disdain, anger, and a group of opticians who feel “ambushed.”

When you first start to delegate optical budget items like COGs, you may notice that the optician takes longer to complete these tasks than you do. This is because you are the expert and the optician is still learning. Be patient. If you have chosen the right person to delegate to and you are delegating correctly, you will find that he or she eventually will become competent and reliable.

Bare-bones advice: Concern yourself with what is accomplished rather than detailing how COGs should be lowered. Allow the person to control his or her own methods and processes.

2. Use a problem-solving tone of voice and body language. A manager unwilling to delegate the levers of control they have worked a lifetime to achieve tells others “how things work around here.” A leader speaks in a pleasant, conversational tone of voice and invites feedback—body language and vocal tone are paramount in communicating both positive and negative feedback in a way that inspires productivity and morale. A leader who delegates well helps dispensary employees learn to communicate their thoughts and feelings about optical sales in a manner that respects them while pointing the way toward the agreed-upon goal and subsequent tasks. Conversational delegation creates a system that promotes buy-in and participation and opticians who know how to solve problems before they blow up.

Bare-bones advice: Be aware that people read between the lines. When your posture changes or your voice changes pitch or tone, so does the message.

3. Clearly identify constraints and boundaries. Where are the lines of authority, responsibility, and accountability? Does the optician feel his suggestions on how to lower COG would be welcome? Which of the following unspoken organizational norms are your opticians following:
   a. Wait to be told what to do?
   b. Ask what to do?
   c. Recommend what should be done, and then act?
   d. Act, and then report results immediately?
   e. Initiate action and then report periodically?

When possible, include an optical representative in delegation decisions. Empower this person to decide which tasks are to be delegated and when. Match the amount of responsibility with the amount of authority. If there is a problem, don’t allow the optician to shift responsibility for the task back to you. Ask for recommended solutions and encourage your future manager to provide an answer.

Bare-bones advice: Employees learn better when they are delegated entire projects and not just detail work. If you ask your optician to seek permission for small details, you are violating the principle of delegation.

To Ask and To Remember

Do you have the backbone to delegate? Remember that not all delegation assignments succeed. There will be mistakes. While you can delegate responsibility, you cannot delegate ultimate accountability. An effective delegator acknowledges optical successes and gives public recognition as well as private praise. You always stand tall when optical delegation turns out well. Let your optical shine and watch your patients and your net grow. AE