

The Grandma Mary Story Series: Where I Learned the Art of Delegation

BY BARB VOLPE, M.ED

During part of my childhood, my sister and I stayed with my grandmother when my mom was at work and my dad, a farmer, was in the fields. My grandmother, Mary, was a busy woman with a multitude of tasks that kept her going from sunup to sundown. She was the grand master at assigning tasks and chores to others in order to get the work done. At the time, I did not realize that one of the leadership lessons I would learn from her would be on the art of delegation.

I was old enough to help Grandma Mary with many of her tasks, but my sister was much younger and limited in the tasks that she could assist with. So, to keep her busy but still doing something useful, Grandma Mary found things for my sister to do that fit her age and abilities. One perfect task assigned to my sister was to rinse the sidewalk with the hose, then use the broom to sweep off the water and dirt. Grandma Mary explained to my sister that this was a very important job and would be her responsibility. She showed her where she would work and explained how nice it would be to have a clean sidewalk. Grandma frequently checked on my sister and praised her for her work. My sister, to this day, still enjoys cleaning the sidewalk and the memories it brings of our grandma.

As the older sister, Grandma Mary assigned me tasks that required higher levels of skill and responsibility, such as drying the dishes, gathering tomatoes from the garden, and dusting the knick-knacks. The tasks we did never felt like chores to be dreaded because Grandma always worked alongside us. As we worked, she told stories, sang, or found ways to make the work seem fun. She let us know the importance of what we were doing, and often, but not always, there was a special reward or treat when the work was finished.

In thinking back on how Grandma enlisted us to help her, there are lessons that leaders can use when delegating tasks to others in our programs. Delegation, when done well, has many benefits. Delegation can save time, promote the improvement of skills, and help staff feel important, useful, and successful. When staff feel trusted and respected with higher levels of responsibility, this tends to increase their commitment to you and the program.

DELEGATION TO A COMMITTEE or “The Great Wienie Roast”

Not only was my grandma great at delegating work to her grandchildren, but she could also gather the neighborhood children to do more significant tasks requiring more people. One such task was raking the fall leaves into a burn pile. Now on a farm, that is a big area to cover! But this also illustrates two other aspects of delegation, **delegating to committees** and **reward systems**.

Grandma Mary would arrange a day when many neighborhood kids could be present. She let us decide which areas we would work in, who would rake, who would carry leaves to a prearranged area for burning, and who would collect the branches and wood for a bonfire. At the end of the work time, Grandma hosted a “great big wienie roast.” She would bring out the Oscar Mayer™ wieners, hot dog buns, chips, and marshmallows for roasting. In the twilight, we roasted our hot dogs and marshmallows and told stories. Grandma was there with us, laughing, letting us know we did a great job, and adding her own special charm.

As leaders, we may find that some tasks require more than one person, or we may have staff who like to work together and have similar interests. This is when forming committees and delegating projects make the most sense. Not only can those projects get done, but committees have a bonding experience as staff work together toward a common goal.

I have heard some great committee ideas that directors have shared with me. Committees could include a celebration committee to send cards to staff honoring their birthdays, anniversaries, etc. Welcome committees can help support new employees. Maybe you would like to “spruce up” the staff lounge and have staff who would love to be on a decorating committee.

Steps for successful delegation

1. **Define what needs to be delegated.** What is a task or job that needs to be done? Out on the farm, the sidewalk gathered the dirt from fields and garden. My grandmother liked a clean sidewalk, so this was a worthwhile task in her eyes.
2. **Determine the right task for the right person.** The task should align with the interests, skill level, and resources of the person(s) it is assigned to. My sister was the right age to handle a hose and broom, plus she enjoyed working outdoors.
3. **Define the expectations and desired outcome.** What will the task look like at completion, and how will you measure success? Dirt was to be swept off the sidewalk, leaving the sidewalk nice and clean.
4. **Provide Guidance.** My sister was shown the area she was to work in, given a description of what she was to do, and told that Grandma would check back with her to see how she was doing.
5. **Check in and Deliver Feedback.** People want to know when they are doing well, and when presented in a kind and non-judgmental way, they also want to learn how to do even better. Grandma was great at giving praise and making you feel that your work was important.

Rewards can be big or small. When the work is finished, words of affirmation, appreciation, or other rewards are important. [Some staff may appreciate](#) a small gift, treats provided in the staff lounge, or time spent talking with you. My grandma was generous with words of affirmation, and time spent doing something fun with her – especially when it involved roasting hotdogs and marshmallows – was also a good reward!

The benefits of delegating are numerous: delegating empowers staff while stretching their abilities and growing their interests, building teamwork and collegiality. Delegation also benefits the leader. It gives the leader time to spend on higher-level duties, increases organizational skills, and gets work done!

“Learn from your elders, especially the lessons they are unaware they teach.” Anthony Shaffer

Delegation is one of the topics we cover in the *Ready to Lead* leadership academy. To check out all of our leadership academies, go to <https://mccormickcenter.nl.edu/services/leadership-academies/>.

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