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**Research Article**

# Delegation: a Power Tool for Department Chairs in Saudi Universities

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**ABSTRACT:** Within the multiple responsibilities for which department chairs are responsible, the skills of delegation make department chairs more effective leaders. Administrative delegation is not a way of escaping responsibilities or avoiding complicated tasks; rather it is a way of building trust and collegiality in the academic department. However, not all delegations produce positive effects or used in away that enhance the development of the people who performed the delegated tasks. Different perspectives and views affect the use of delegation, as the interviews with department chairs and faculty members indicated in this study. Effective delegation entails assigning tasks with a brief explanation of the expected result, express the sense of confidence and trust that the delegated task will be fulfilled. In addition, the sense of appreciation inspires others to reach their potential.

**Key Words:** Leadership, higher education, department chairs, delegation, effective delegation.

## Introduction

Different leadership practices affect the effectiveness of an organization (Sergiovanni, 2001). In any organization, the responsibility for success rests heavily on the leaders. Therefore, the result that leaders produce usually represent their effectiveness in leadership. However, an Arabic proverb says that "a one hand can't clap" indicating the importance of working with others to accomplish tasks. Delegation is a form of engaging others and a lubricant for the leadership process (Tracy, 2013). Furthermore, it is an essential element for organizational growth and productivity (Allred, 2015).

Delegation is defined as "the transfer of authority by one person or group to another person or group"; "the process of giving decision-making authority to subordinate employee" (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013). The need for delegation increases as the leader's responsibilities increase. Although delegation adds value to the leader's work, the body of research on delegation, especially in the academic context is still limited (Barford, 1992). Particularly in academic departments, the nature of the chair's responsibilities is complicated (Carroll & Wolverton, 2004; Delener, 2013; Gmelch & Miskin, 2004; Hecht, 2006; Johnson, Hanna & Olcott, 2003; McArthur, 2002; Murry & Stauffacher, 2001). Thus, sharing responsibilities with others is more needed. In a study conducted by Gonaim (2017) on the effective characteristics and behaviours of department chairs in higher education in Saudi Arabia, delegation was one of the aspects that characterised the effective chair. However, interviews conducted to obtain department chairs and faculty members' views on delegation by department chairs indicated that the concept of delegation is misused by some leaders and does not achieve optimum results. Different perspectives and views affect the use of delegation, as this study indicated.

## Background

### Leadership in Higher Education

In the context of higher, information technology and the growing diversity have increased the complexity of leadership (Fullan & Scott, 2009). Hence, if universities want to survive in the 21st century, they have to accept major modification in philosophy, leadership styles, and practices that sustain them in the changing world (Basham, 2010). The likelihood that traditional higher education and bureaucratic authority can meet the needs and challenges of this century is diminishing (Astin & Astin, 2000; Farnsworth, 2007; Sergiovanni, 2001; Knight & Trowler, 2001). A top-down leadership approach impedes the evolution of academic freedom and autonomy (Spendlove, 2007).

Therefore, the type of shared leadership became inevitable. Distributed leadership is one of the model that reduces traditional vertical leadership and encourages a collective approach rather than the exercise of individual power (Jones, Lefoe, Harvey & Ryland, 2012). It connotes sharing and delegating tasks to others to perform them. In addition, the sustainability and development of these institutions in the 21st century necessitates developing their people and their leadership abilities (Spendlove, 2007). Having said that, different practices that leaders use contribute to the development of people such as delegation.

Lucas et al., (2000) asserted that most postsecondary institutions still cling to a hierarchical organizational structure. However, regardless of the existence of power hierarchy in almost every organization, the sub-power in organizations--such as the departmental level-- play significant roles in delegating tasks and empowering others (Barford, 1992).

### Leadership in Academic Department

Most of the literature has pointed to the ambiguity and the complexity of the role of department chair (Carroll & Wolverton, 2004; Delener, 2013; Gmelch & Miskin, 2004; Hecht, 2006; Johnson, Hanna & Olcott, 2003; McArthur,

2002; Murry & Stauffacher, 2001). Gmelch, who has written extensively on the subject and has served as Director of the Center for the Study of Department Chairs at Washington State University, asserts in his writing that notwithstanding the complexity of the role, most lack clarity of their specific roles. Carroll and Wolverton note that department chairs make 80% of the administrative decisions on campuses. They influence organizational policy, recommend faculty for appointment and promotion, influence and defend the department, and affect students' interaction with their university. Establishing departmental goals and objectives and representing the perspective of faculty to the institution or other professional organizations are all the department chair's responsibility (Carroll & Wolverton). Accordingly, the role involves addressing the needs of various constituents: students, faculty, higher administrators, alumni, and community groups (Aziz et al., 2005; Rumsey, 2013*).*

Over 50 year period, extensive research has been undertaken to identify behaviours for an effective leader (Yuki, 2002). The studies given rise that leadership involves two pillars: task achievement and relationship behaviors; balancing the two is fundamental for effective leadership (Northouse, 2013). In Preedy, Bennett and Wise's (2012) perspective, the effective leader manifests a combination of traits and behaviors. Although the traits and behaviors of effective leadership are as varied as the contexts are diverse, literature has pointed to some factors of effective leadership such as self-awareness, interpersonal skills, delegation, integrity, fostering collegiality and trust (Bryman, 2007; Gomes & Knowles, 1999; Rumsey, 2013). Delegation is one of the elements that promote leadership effectiveness because of its contribution on the development of others and increasing efficiency.

**Saudi Culture and Delegation**

Culture usually shapes the practice of leadership and determines how leaders are expected to behave (Hofstede, G. H., Hofstede, G. & Minkov, 2010; House, 2004; Schein, 2004; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2000). Culture and leadership cannot be separated, as leadership is basically a social construct. Throughout history, culture has shaped the art of leadership because each culture affects people, leaders and how organizations function (Hofstede, G. H., Hofstede, G. & Minkov, 2010; House, 2004; Schein, 2004; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2000). Most of the literature on leadership and culture emphasizes that when leadership is rooted in the values of a particular culture, its effectiveness is enhanced. Therefore, a substantial body of research has been conducted on national culture and human behaviors such as Hofstede's 1960-1970 study and GLOBE study conducted by House in 1991. Hofstede's five dimensions of Saudi culture were used as a frame to analyze Saudi culture.

*Hofstede's study.* Hofstede's five dimensions of culture is a valuable tool for understanding national cultures, which helps in describing the differences and similarities between cultural groups. Therefore, Hofstede's (2010) five dimensions of national culture are used as a framework for introducing Saudi culture and leadership. The five dimensions are:

1. Power Distance (PDI).
2. Individualism/Collectivism (IDV).
3. Masculinity/Femininity (MAS).
4. Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI).
5. Long/Short Term Orientation (LTO).

*Power distance (PDI).* The power distance dimension can be defined as the extent to which "the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010, p. 61). It represents how people communicate and either accept or give authority. Saudi Arabia is considered a high power distance society, with a score of 90 in this dimension. This high score shows that Saudis accept an unequal division of power. They accept their superiors telling them what to do without further justification. Politically, Saudi is a classic monarchy ruled by a king who inherits the crown without election. Most organizations are hierarchical in structure and centralized authority is popular. The degree of dependency is very strong in many aspects of society. Children rely on their parents to a later age than in the West, and parents rely on their children when they become older. In Saudi society, one's social status is very important and should be displayed so that others can show proper respect (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010).

*Individualism versus collectivism (IDV).* The IDV dimension refers to the way people balance their personal interests against those of groups such as their family, tribe, company, or country. Saudi Arabia is considered a collectivist culture with a score of only 22 on the IDV dimension. In Saudi society, the interests of the group are predominant over individual interests. The group provides values, recognition and rewards; people seek harmony and loyalty. In collectivist cultures, the relationship of mutual dependence between the individual and the group manifests itself in both practical and psychological ways. The social network is the primary source of information. In the workplace, the relationship between managers and subordinates is based on ties of obligation (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010).

In the context of higher education, loyalty to group and collegiality are more defined (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013). For instance, evaluation, rewards and recognition within organizations are typically bestowed on a group or a department.

*Masculinity versus femininity (MAS).* This dimension refers to gender, and gender roles. It indicates the degree to which dominant values in a society tend to lean towards either masculinity or femininity. In masculine cultures, the dominant values are achievement, success, heroism, assertiveness, and material reward for success. In contrast, in feminine cultures the dominant values are quality of life, cooperation, modesty, and caring for others (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010).

Saudi culture has a score of 61 in this dimension, which is considered a high masculinity society. In Saudi society,

gender roles are highly differentiated with the classic standard masculinity pattern in general, in which the father earns and the mother cares. Saudi society is a masculine society that encourages competition and performance.

*Uncertainty avoidance (UAI).* Hofstede's dimension of uncertainty avoidance reflects the extent to which a society accepts ambiguity and uncertainty. It is about how society deals with the future that can never be known. Uncertainty avoidance can be defined as "the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous and unknown situations" (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010, p. 191).

Saudi culture exhibits uncertainty avoidance, scoring 69 in this dimension. In this culture, people hold strong beliefs and avoid abnormal behavior and ideas. Saudi Arabia is a rule-oriented society with many rules, regulations, central control and instructions to reduce uncertainty and ambiguity. For instance, the entire kingdom is based on an absolute monarchy. The authority and control of all the ministries are in the government's hands. It resembles what Weber called a traditional authority structure (Allen, 2004). Most official decisions have to be enacted by royal decree. Hence, a centralized structure, authoritarianism, and a transactional style of leadership are the norm in most organizations (Drummond & Al-Anazi, 1997).

*Long-term orientation (LTO).* Long-Term Orientation (LTO) refers to "the fostering of virtues oriented toward future rewards" (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010, p. 239), whereas short-term orientation refers to "the fostering of virtues related to the past and present, in particular, respect for tradition, preservation of face" (p. 239).

Saudi Arabia is considered a short-term oriented society with a score of 36 in this dimension. People who score low in this dimension are keen to achieve fast results. They show high respect for traditions and there is no concern about saving for the future.

**Delegation in the light of Saudi Culture**

Islam and Saudi culture have an impact on shaping the characteristics and behaviors of the leader. Although empowerment is a component of some contemporary leadership approaches, such as transformational leadership, the literature on the Saudi higher education system, which is a centralized system, does not indicate that empowerment is a characteristic of effective leaders (Alamri, 2011; Alkhazim, 2003; Elyas & Picard, 2013; Smith & Abouammoh, 2013). The first dimension of Hofstede's study on national culture and human behaviors deals with power distance, which indicates the extent to which people accept the unequal distribution of power, and how willingly they accept orders given by their superiors. In Hofstede's findings Saudi Arabia scored high in this dimension, which may explain why the literature does not mention the word empowerment as one of the qualities of the leaders in higher education. Furthermore, Alahmadi (2011), in her study of the challenges facing women leader in Saudi Arabia, indicated that empowerment, which means leadership training opportunities and freedom in decision making, is not fully achieved in women sectors. In spite of the literature that does not indicate that empowerment is a characteristic for an effective leader, and even though most Saudi organizations are hierarchical in structure, leaders are expected to provide developmental opportunities, and be able to delegate. Both delegation, and providing developmental opportunities, are forms of empowerment, although the term empowerment was not specifically indicated in the literature of Saudi culture and leadership.

The high score that Saudi culture exhibited in Hofstede's dimension of uncertainty avoidance interprets the reason behind the minimized use of delegation in departmental leadership. In addition, it is a reason that many chairs prefer to supervise the delegated task precisely in favour of avoiding abnormal behavior and ideas. Since, Saudi Arabia is a rule-oriented society with many rules, regulations, central control and instructions are such ways to reduce uncertainty and ambiguity.

**Department Chairs' Perspectives on Delegation**

Although empowerment may not be seen in the literature as an essential characteristic of an effective leader in the Saudi context, and leaders could potentially be seen to lead effectively by delegating tasks without delegating any authority, department chairs believe that they need to engage their faculty members meaningfully in decision making and carrying out tasks collaboratively and collegially when necessary. Furthermore, chairs believed that their effectiveness would be improved if they were able to explain their decision to their faculty members, and engaged them in developing and performing tasks--all forms of empowerment.

Acquiring department chairs' views on delegation revealed significant points. The appropriate use of delegation in an academic context does not interfere with Saudi culture and can ease the various responsibilities on the chair's shoulders. The participants emphasized the importance of delegation for department chairs even if they have impeccable skills and qualifications. Delegation frees the chair to tackle more important issues and create a culture of trust in the department. It secures extra time for planning, creativity and development. The participants also stressed that delegation contribute to the development of subordinates. However, the degree of delegation varies among chairs for a number of reasons. For instance, domination, centralization, lack of trust, fear of competition are factors that affect the degree of delegation. In addition, the capacities of faculty members, their experience, their educational level, their familiarity with the university and their aptitude to perform duties are other factors affecting the degree of delegation. It should be noted too that some tasks are not suitable for delegation. For instance, as the chairs indicated, the nature of some work necessitates confidentiality, privacy or instant execution. In these case, delegation is not appropriate.

Faculty members are diverse in their qualifications, attitudes and personalities; hence, selecting the best person for each

task is important. This however does not mean ignoring some members in the department and focusing on the diligent members. Department chairs have to look at the big picture and consider the development and growth of each member, not just what they have achieved so far. Assigning progressively more important tasks to unengaged members can trigger them to appreciate their value and significance within the group. In addition, this approach enhances their growth.

Some department chairs prefer to follow up with the delegated duties and sometimes redo the work the way they want it to be done. These type of chairs are attracted to the management role, as Barford (1992) pointed out. They feel that because they are given formal power, they have to direct others to impose order from above. Delegation is challenging for these chairs, and when they do delegate tasks, their subordinates always complain about the lack of trust on their performance.

It is worth noting that the higher education system in Saudi Arabia is highly structured with many rules and regulations. If these regulations were to be provided to chairs with more detailed descriptions for practical, it could become easier for the chairs to delegate tasks based on clear regulations.

**Faculty Members' Perspectives on Delegation**

Interviews with numerous faculty members indicate that delegation is one of the most important characteristics of an effective chair. Faculty members appreciate the chairs who engage, trust and share some of their responsibilities with them. However, not every act of delegation is effective. Department chairs engage in three types of delegation. The first type is to delegate an entire task without following-up to ensure its completion. The second type is to delegate a task but micromanage the faculty member as he or she performs it. Neither of these methods is effective in the eyes of faculty members . The third type, which is characterized by the participants as effective delegation, is delegation plus follow-up to ensure the completion of the task without interference on how the task is performed .

Following up on a delegated duty does not destroy trust if it done wisely and with sensitivity. Furthermore, faculty members appreciate the chair following up in order to ensure the accomplishment of the task accurately. Chairs who look over faculty members' shoulders or who follow up as a way of belittling their work create dissatisfied people, diminish trust and restrict their subordinates' creativity. Since people's ways of thinking are diverse, faculty members appreciate the chairs who allow them to use their imagination and give them the chance to use their creativity in performing tasks.

This classification of the degree of delegation is supported in the literature. Schriesheim and Neider (1988) suggested three forms of delegation: advisory, informational and extreme. Advisory delegation means that subordinates can take action or make decisions after obtaining the leader's approval. Informational delegation means that subordinates can take action and make decisions after acquiring all the pertinent information from the leader. The last form is extreme delegation, in which subordinates perform the entire task without input from the leader. The findings supported the first and second forms of delegation, in which the leader is aware of the progress of the task delegated.

Faculty members appreciate chairs who express confidence and trust that they will fulfill the delegated task. The sense of appreciation inspires others to reach their potential. Expressing appreciation takes different forms. When faculty members succeed in performing tasks, giving them credit, listening to their feedback and appreciating their work motivates them to give more and more. Delegating tasks means placing duties on subordinates with ample time to complete the tasks. Accordingly, faculty members expressed their annoyance when asked to perform tasks in unrealistic time frames or when their work is not appreciated.

Faculty members appreciate chairs who delegate tasks and allow them to be accomplished in their own way. However, they indicated that they appreciate a chair who provides a broad explanation about the delegated task and the expected outcome and then allows them to use their own approach in fulfilling the task. In contrast they do not appreciate a chair who only delegates without providing any clue about the task or the expected outcome.

**Conclusion**

Within the multiple responsibilities for which department chairs are responsible, the skills of delegation make department chairs more effective leaders. Administrative delegation is not a way of escaping responsibilities or avoiding complicated tasks; rather it is a way of building trust and collegiality in the academic department.

However, leaders are not expected to throw their followers into deep water without ensuring their swimming abilities. Effective delegation entails assigning tasks with a brief explanation of the expected result, and then leaving subordinates to use their creativity without interference, while providing development opportunities and encouraging faculty members to enhance their skills to ready them to perform the tasks delegated.

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