

# Why some employees resist delegation from their managers

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Think about the last time your boss delegated a task to you. Did you perceive that request as a sign of strong leadership—or as your manager shirking responsibility? In the end, did you successfully complete the

task, or find a way out of it?

According to new research from the University at Buffalo School of Management, your answers to these questions may depend on whether you believe your boss is competent and your gender.

"Read any popular business publication, and you'll find articles championing delegation as a highly effective [leadership](#) behavior that empowers workers," says lead author Kalan Norris, a doctoral researcher in the UB School of Management. "But sometimes, employees don't see it that way. They see an unsupportive manager who avoids making decisions or doing menial tasks—and they react accordingly."

As Norris explains, delegation has long been viewed as a way for leaders to increase autonomy, productivity and [job satisfaction](#) among employees. However, the study—published online and forthcoming in print in the Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies—found that under some circumstances, employees perceive delegation negatively as laissez-faire leadership, or an absence of leadership.

In turn, the researchers found that when employees view delegation as hands-off leadership, they tend to passively aggressively resist their manager's directives. According to the authors, this "dysfunctional resistance" costs U.S. companies about \$50 billion annually.

"If employees think their manager is just passing off unwanted tasks, they probably won't overtly fight back," says study co-author James Lemoine, Ph.D., associate professor of organization and human resources in the UB School of Management. "Instead, they may make a half-hearted effort or pretend they forgot or don't understand the request."

The researchers surveyed nearly 150 employees from different levels of

a mental health care organization, analyzing their perceptions of delegation, their trust in their manager's competence and any resistance behaviors they reported.

When employees were less certain of their manager's capabilities, their response depended on their gender. "Women were more likely to give their managers the benefit of the doubt and react positively to delegation," Lemoine says, "whereas men more readily jumped to the conclusion that their manager was just being lazy and avoiding their leadership responsibilities."

Conversely, when employees believed their manager was more competent, the researchers found no significant relationship between that belief and their perception of delegation for either gender. In other words, their reaction to their manager's delegation, positive or negative, was based on other factors—perhaps the type of task or the communication around it, the researchers suggest.

"Overall, while delegation can be effective for leaders and organizations, our research shows it can have [unintended negative consequences](#) too," Norris says. "To successfully delegate, managers should consider the nature of the [task](#), communicate openly and ensure their subordinates understand their intentions, expectations and needs—especially if their team is working remotely."

**More information:** Kalan R. Norris et al, Is it Laissez-Faire Leadership or Delegation? A Deeper Examination of an Over-Simplified Leadership Phenomenon, *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/1548051821997407](https://doi.org/10.1177/1548051821997407)

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