BEYOND RESPONSIBILITY LAUNDERING

When Managers Delegate Decisions to Escape Accountability

When authority stays upward and responsibility moves down

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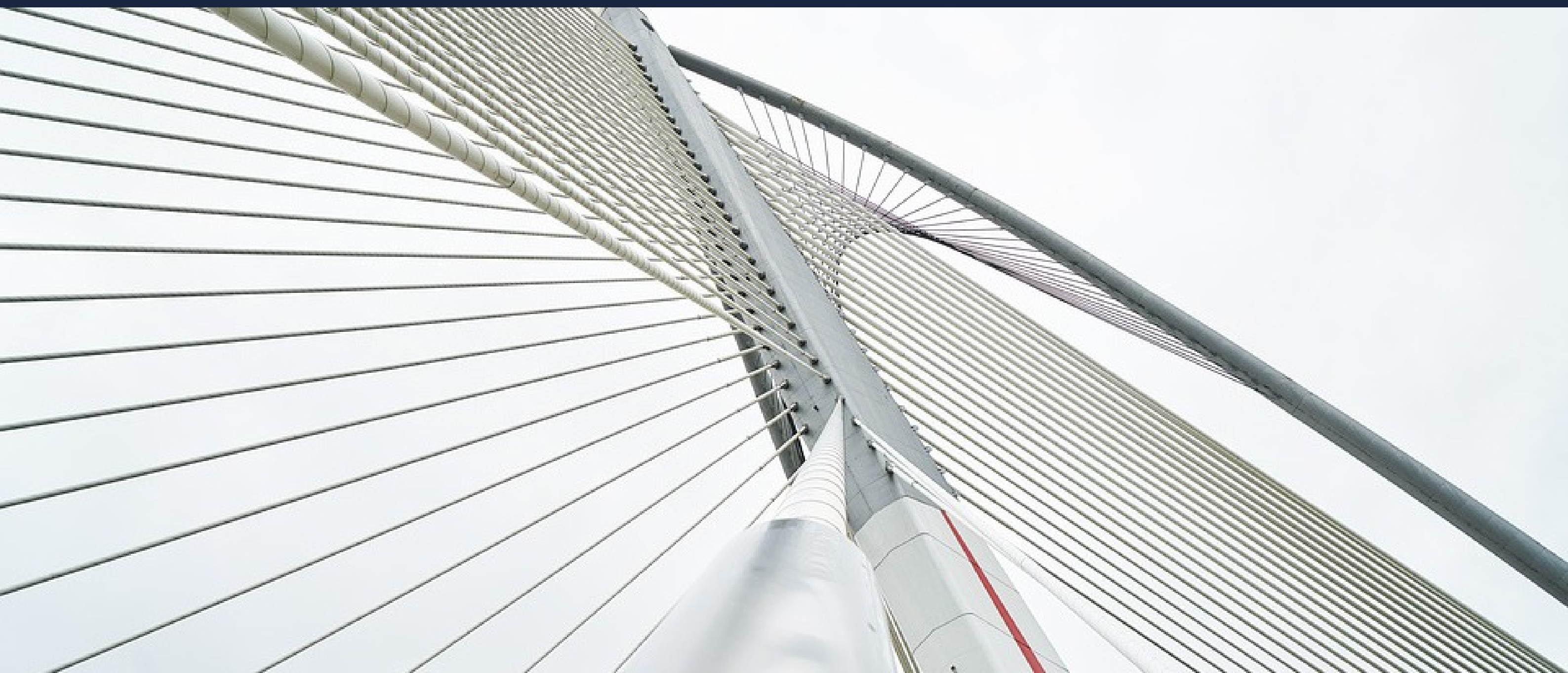

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> *"If the manager can disown all of that the moment the result becomes inconvenient, the decision was never fully delegated."*

1. Delegation and the alibi

Management is not just the distribution of work. It is the ownership of decisions that shape direction, risk, resources and consequences.

That distinction matters because one of the most corrosive forms of management failure can look, at first, like empowerment.

A manager faces a decision that belongs to the role: a priority has to be set, a trade-off accepted, a risk taken, a person backed, a budget moved. Instead of making the call, the manager pushes it downward. The language is usually attractive. You decide. I trust the team. Take ownership.

But the authority that accompanies the decision is incomplete. The constraints are vague. The political cover is uncertain. The manager remains close enough to intervene and far enough away to deny responsibility.

Then the outcome disappoints, circumstances change, or somebody more senior asks an uncomfortable question.

The manager returns as critic.

The decision is retold as somebody else's choice. The ambiguity that surrounded it disappears from the story. The person who was required to choose now owns the failure; the person whose role should have carried the decision keeps clean hands.

That is not delegation.

It is responsibility laundering.

“That is not delegation. It is responsibility laundering.”

> *The mechanism*
> *Decision exposure moves downward while authority, narrative control and the power to punish remain upward.*
> *That asymmetry is what turns delegation into an alibi.*

2. Why the distinction matters

Poor delegation is usually discussed as a management technique: unclear objectives, insufficient authority, weak communication, inadequate support.

Those things matter. But responsibility laundering is more serious because the defect is not merely operational. It is moral.

Managers are given authority precisely because some decisions cannot be made safely from everywhere in the organisation. A decision about strategic priority, risk tolerance, resourcing or a person's future may require information, legitimacy or authority that sits with the manager and not with the person below.

Delegating such a decision does not automatically become empowering simply because somebody more junior is invited to make it.

The relevant question is whether the decision itself has genuinely moved.

Has the person received the authority to act? Are the constraints visible? Is the manager prepared to defend a sound decision when the outcome is unpopular? Will the manager tell the truth later about the conditions under which the choice was made?

If not, the subordinate has not been given ownership. They have been given exposure.

That is the first moral problem.

The second is worse. The person can become useful precisely because they can absorb consequences that the manager wishes to avoid.

A colleague becomes a human firewall: close enough to the decision to carry the blame, but not powerful enough to control the conditions that shaped it.

Authority without ownership is not empowerment. It is exploitation dressed up as process.

3. How the story gets rewritten

Responsibility laundering rarely ends when the decision is made. Its most effective move happens afterwards.

The original situation may have been confused: objectives were incomplete, resources constrained, several senior stakeholders disagreed, and the manager avoided choosing between them. The person below made the best call available.

After failure, the history becomes cleaner.

They chose poorly.

That sentence can erase almost everything that mattered.

It erases who owned the unresolved trade-off. It erases which constraints were withheld. It erases whether the manager privately encouraged the decision while publicly preserving distance from it. It erases the possibility that the subordinate was choosing between options already damaged by decisions made above them.

The manager has not merely escaped a difficult decision. They have acquired retrospective control of the narrative.

That is why the practice is so destructive. Accountability depends on a truthful record of how a decision came to exist. Once the powerful can rewrite that record after the outcome is known, learning becomes almost impossible.

The organisation no longer asks, What made this decision reasonable at the time?

It asks, Whose name was attached to it?

4. The scapegoat economy

One incident can be dismissed as bad management. Repeated often enough, the pattern changes the organisation.

People learn quickly where risk really sits.

If taking ownership means accepting responsibility without authority, sensible people stop volunteering for ownership. They hedge. They escalate. They ask for approvals that were previously unnecessary. They copy more people into messages. They insist that decisions are documented before acting.

From the outside, this can look like bureaucracy or a lack of initiative.

Sometimes it is self-defence.

A scapegoat economy has begun to form.

- Upward: managers collect credit for direction while preserving distance from difficult implementation choices.
- Downward: teams absorb ambiguity and then absorb blame.
- Sideways: peers learn that being the named decision-maker may be more dangerous than leaving the decision unresolved.

The damage is not simply that people become cautious. The organisation gradually selects for caution.

The ambitious lesson is no longer make good decisions. It becomes make sure a bad decision cannot be traced cleanly to you.

> *"A business can survive a missed target. It struggles when truth about responsibility becomes negotiable."*

That is a profound change in culture. A business can survive a missed target. It struggles when truth about responsibility becomes negotiable.

5. Empowerment or abandonment?

Several familiar explanations are used to defend this kind of behaviour. Most contain enough truth to sound reasonable.

What the manager says	The test
"I'm empowering the team."	Did authority, constraints and protection move with the decision?
"I wanted their input."	Input is not the same as transferring the final call.
"Leaders cannot decide everything."	Correct. But they must still decide what only their authority can decide.
"They had ownership."	Could they act without an invisible veto, and will management share the consequences?

What the manager says	The test
"We are a flat culture."	A flat structure does not make accountability disappear.

The word empowerment deserves particular suspicion here because real empowerment creates more agency.

Fake delegation creates more exposure.

The difference becomes visible when the decision goes badly.

A genuinely delegated decision can still be wrong. The person who made it may still need to explain the reasoning and learn from the outcome. Delegation does not eliminate accountability.

But the manager remains accountable for the delegation itself: why this decision was delegated, whether the person had adequate authority, whether the constraints were clear, and whether the organisation supported a reasonable choice.

If the manager can disown all of that the moment the result becomes inconvenient, the decision was never fully delegated.

The risk was outsourced.

6. A test before you delegate

Before handing a consequential decision to somebody else, a manager should be able to answer five questions without hiding behind management language.

1. Does this decision genuinely belong below me? Or am I avoiding a call that comes with my own role?
2. Are the constraints explicit? Does the person know the budget, timing, non-negotiables and real boundaries of the choice?
3. Does authority match responsibility? Can they act, or can they merely become accountable for a recommendation others may override?
4. Will I stand behind a sound process when the outcome is imperfect? Support that exists only after success is not support.
5. Will I tell the truth about my part in the setup? If the decision fails, will the later account include my ambiguity, delay, constraints and interventions?

A "no" does not always mean the decision cannot be delegated.

It does mean the manager has more work to do before calling the arrangement ownership.

7. What responsible delegation requires

Good management does not mean hoarding every decision. That produces its own dysfunction. The point is not to centralise choice but to keep authority and accountability coherent.

A manager should make the decisions that come with the seat and genuinely transfer the ones that do not.

When a decision is delegated, four things need to move with it:

- Clarity. The person knows what is being decided and what is not.
- Authority. They have the practical power to make the choice real.
- Support. They are not abandoned when the decision becomes politically difficult.
- Truth. The eventual story reflects how the decision was actually made, including management's part in it.

This also changes how failure should be handled.

A poor outcome after a sound, properly authorised decision may be a learning problem. A poor outcome after vague authority, hidden constraints and retrospective blame is first a management problem.

Those are not the same thing, and organisations should resist the temptation to treat them as if they were.

8. The burden that comes with the seat

Delegation is one of management's most useful tools because no serious organisation can operate if every decision travels upward.

But delegation only works when it transfers enough authority to make responsibility fair.

Otherwise the language of ownership becomes a disguise.

The manager says, You decide, while retaining the veto.

They say, Take ownership, while reserving the right to distance themselves.

They say, I trust the team, until trust becomes expensive.

At that point the problem is no longer poor technique. It is a breach of the moral contract created by authority.

Management gives people the right to ask others to carry difficult work. It does not give them the right to use those people as insulation from difficult consequences.

A manager's integrity is not demonstrated by how elegantly responsibility is assigned.

It is demonstrated by the burdens they refuse to push downward simply to remain unblameable.