The Downside of Delegation: Interpersonal Consequences of Decision Support Choices

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Abstract

People seeking decision support may elicit it in one of two ways: they may ask for advice (autonomy-oriented help-seeking), or they may delegate the decision (dependency-oriented help-seeking) (Nadler 2002). Prior work on these forms of decision support has largely pursued them independently, with a focus on decision accuracy (Bonaccio & Dalal, 2006). We broaden this focus to consider an important consequence: interpersonal reactions to those requesting decision support. Although research in the management domain has emphasized the importance of delegating to foster employee buy-in (suggesting delegators would be positively perceived) (Drescher, 2016), recent decision-making work has highlighted an aversion to bearing responsibility (Steffel, Williams, & Perrmann-Graham, 2016), which could result in negative views of delegators relative to advice seekers. In a series of seven experiments, we find that those who provide decision support interpersonally penalize those who seek support through delegation versus advice seeking, judging them as more manipulative, and choosing not to work with them or provide them with additional decision support. This effect is mediated by perceptions that the help requester is shirking their responsibilities. Moreover, requesters do not anticipate these consequences. By focusing on interpersonal rather than informational, effort-based, or accuracy-centered outcomes, this work advances a more holistic view of the relative tradeoffs decision makers face when they seek the help of others.

Study 1: Do decision support providers interpersonally penalize those who seek decision support via delegation versus advice seeking?

Interactive Experiment: Participants were paired with each other and told one of them (Teammate A) was tasked with making a decision. Then, we instructed those in the Teammate A role to ask for advice or delegate to their partner (Teammate B) in a live chat session. Those who were asked for advice or delegated to (those in the Teammate B role) were our focal participants. They proceeded through the study as below:

1. Learn About Group Task
2. Choose Partner for Next Task
3. Fuller Support Request (Help/Advice/Make Decision)
4. Ask to Make a Decision
5. Chat: Asked for Advice on a Decision
6. Chat: Asked to Make a Decision
7. Scale Measures
8. End of Partner Relationship

Measures:
- Decision to continue working with requester
- Requester manipulativeness (α=.93, IRIP)
- Requestor moral character (α=.88, Shrabel & Nadler, 2008)
- Willingness to provide additional decision support to requester (α=.87, Blunden, Logg, Brooks, John, & Gino, 2019)
- Effort (α=.91, Speer, King, & Grossenbacher, 2016)

Analysis of Willingness to Provide Additional Decision Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Delegation</th>
<th>-5.08 **</th>
<th>-5.33 **</th>
<th>-4.77</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>.044</th>
<th>.132</th>
<th>.170</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>In Helper's Job Scope</td>
<td>-0.75</td>
<td>-0.067</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Seeker's Job Scope</td>
<td>-0.87</td>
<td>-0.089</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Importance</td>
<td>-0.69</td>
<td>-0.071</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Helper Relative Power</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
<td>-0.027</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Affected: Helper</td>
<td>-0.49</td>
<td>-0.039</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Affected: Seeker</td>
<td>-0.34</td>
<td>-0.037</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Affected: Boss</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
<td>-0.031</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Affected: Coworkers</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>-0.048</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Affected: Others Outside Org</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.485</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Delegation providers interpersonally penalize those who delegate controlling for a variety of situational and individual characteristics.

Study 2: Do decision supporter providers interpersonally penalize delegators across a variety of contexts?

Recall Task: Please recall and write about a time a coworker asked you for advice on a decision you made. Then, we asked participants to rate their desire to work with the requestor (delegator) on a 7-point scale from “very low” to “very high” (Yerby, 2014).

Measures:
- Requester manipulativeness (α=.87)
- Requestor moral character (α=.94)
- Willingness to provide additional decision support to requester (α=.81)
- Event characterististics (control variables in below regression)

Analysis of Willingness to Provide Additional Decision Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>Adjusted R²</th>
<th>n</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Delegation</td>
<td>.058</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>180</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advice Seeking</td>
<td>.055</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>180</td>
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<tr>
<td>Future Support</td>
<td>.054</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01

Decision supporter providers interpersonally penalize requesters by seeking decision support via delegation rather than advice seeking.

Study 3: Why do decision supporter providers interpersonally penalize delegators?

Scenario: Imagine a colleague tasked with choosing between two hotels for your Executive Team’s upcoming stay asks you for advice [delegates the decision to you].

Measures:
- Main dependent variables (manipulativeness, moral character, willingness to provide future support)
- Self-focused: (1) felt responsibility (α=.84) & (2) beliefs credit & blame will be given to self (α=.83)
- Requestor-focused: (3) perceptions of requester’s felt responsibility (α=.91) & (4) beliefs credit & blame will be given to requester (α=.86)

Indirect Effect Confidence Interval:
- Delegation vs. Advice Seeking (α=.86)

- Requestor Responsibility
- Self-focused: Felt Responsibility
- Requester-focused: Perceptions of Requester’s Felt Responsibility

Decision supporter providers interpersonally penalize requesters by seeking decision support via delegation rather than advice seeking.

Study 4: Are decision support requesters aware of these interpersonal consequences?

Scenario: Hotel decision scenario from Study 3: (X 2 decision support provider (i.e. advisor or surrogate) vs. requester (i.e. advice seeker or delegator))

Measures:
- Main dependent variables (manipulativeness, moral character, willingness to provide future support)
- (Providers indicated perceptions of the requester, and requesters indicated meta-perceptions, how they thought providers would respond)

- Manipulativeness
- Moral Character
- Willingness to Support

Help requesters do not anticipate differences in interpersonal consequences stemming from their decision support method.

Conclusions

At the heart of our investigation lies a fundamental question: will the transfer of choice responsibility reflect positively or negatively on the support requester? Whereas work in the management domain has emphasized the positive effects that empowerment via decision transfer can yield, research in the decision-making domain suggests support providers may resent being asked to take on choice responsibility. We find evidence of the latter perspective: those asked for decision support via delegation rather than advice seeking interpersonally penalized the requestor, an effect mediated by perceptions that the requester was shirking their responsibilities.

Beyond resolving these conflicting viewpoints, our findings offer a new perspective on the consequences of seeking help with our choices by focusing on interpersonal outcomes. This more holistic view of the downstream effects of decision support requests could enable support requesters to more consciously consider potential trade-offs they face between their desired outcomes, such as making the most accurate choice, and establishing a positive relationship with help providers.

Shedding light on the interpersonal consequences of decision support interactions may also prove valuable for decision support providers, who often have benevolent intentions towards those they help. Highlighting differences in interpersonal consequences between these two forms of decision support requests may enable help givers to identify and counteract unintentional negative reactions they have towards help requesters.

This work also contributes to a nascent body of research focusing on the recipients of decision support requests. Whereas a large body of research has been dedicated to understanding the thought processes of decision support seekers, less work has explored the help provider’s perspective. Gaining insight into the other half of the interaction – delving into the minds of those who provide decision support - can uncover valuable insights expanding the collective understanding of these interactions.

Questions & feedback welcome! Contact Hayley Blunden at hblunden@hbs.edu