CREATIVE LEADERSHIP

Commissioning Conversations

Knowing how to commission or delegate work is rarely taught deliberately. Most of us pick it up as we go, from what we have experienced and observed. The challenge is to understand what works for both parties: the hand passing the work on, and the hand receiving it.

Most feedback problems start earlier, in how the work was asked for. A clear ask at the start means less rework, and an easier conversation when the work comes back.

Most sections end with a prompt to paste into your organisation's AI tool. Swap in your own detail where you see square brackets, and leave out names and anything sensitive. Voice mode can make this easier: you can just talk, without needing complete sentences, and the back and forth flows.

How to use this guide

1. **Start with what gets in your way.** Find the reason that sounds most like you, and the fix that goes with it.
2. **Every time you hand work over, use Before you ask and the one-page brief.** For small tasks, the two-minute version is enough.
3. **Dip into the rest as you need it:** questions to ask, keeping an eye on the work, and reviewing it when it comes back.

What gets in your way

If the work still runs through you, there is a reason. Name it first, because each reason needs a different fix.

WHAT YOU TELL YOURSELF	WHAT HELPS
"It's quicker to do it myself."	It is, the first time. Every time after that, it is still yours. Start small with the two-minute version.
"My team is already stretched."	Then handing over more work only adds to the pile. Ask what they will stop or slow to make room.
"I have incredibly high standards."	Keep them, and say them out loud. A standard held in your head can't be met. Name good, good enough, and what you want to see first.
"I need to know where everything is."	Agree the check-ins up front and keep one shared view.
"They're not ready."	Stay close, ask for a first look early, and treat the work as how they get ready.
"I'm the expert, and I can't get out of the weeds."	Your value has moved. It now sits in the brief you give and the questions you ask, not in the work you do yourself. Ask before you fix.

Before you ask: get clear yourself

If you can't answer these six questions, the person doing the work can't either.

1. What is this work for, and who will use it?
2. What does good look like, and what does good enough look like?
3. What do I want to see first: rough thinking, a working draft, or a finished piece?
4. What is fixed, and what is theirs to decide?
5. How much of me does this need?
6. What will they stop or slow to make room for this?

The fifth question deserves a deliberate answer. Not every piece of work needs you in it.

HOW CLOSE	WHAT IT MEANS	USE WHEN
Stay close	You see it early and often	The stakes are high, or the work is new to them
Check in	You agree the points where you will look	The stakes are moderate and they have some experience
Hand over	You see it when it is done	The stakes are lower, or they have done this well before

Say which one you have chosen, and why. Then close attention reads as care for the work, not doubt in the person.

The fourth question needs the same care. For each decision in the work, say who makes it. Management 3.0's seven levels of delegation give you the words.

LEVEL	WHO DECIDES
Tell	You decide and tell them
Sell	You decide and explain why
Consult	You ask their view, then decide
Agree	You decide together
Advise	They decide, with your advice
Inquire	They decide, then tell you
Delegate	They decide, and you don't need to know

TRY IT WITH AI

I am about to ask someone on my team to do [piece of work]. Ask me one question at a time until I can state the purpose, what good looks like, what good enough looks like, what is fixed, and what is theirs to decide. Then write it back to me as a one-page brief.

The conversation: five things to cover

A commissioning conversation covers five things, and the last one matters most.

1. **Purpose.** Why this work matters and what it will be used for.
2. **Done.** What good looks like, what good enough looks like, and what you want to see first.
3. **Boundaries.** What is fixed, such as the deadline, the format and who must be involved. Then what is theirs to decide.
4. **Check-ins.** When you will see it, at what stage, and how they reach you if they get stuck.
5. **Playback.** Ask them to tell you what they have heard. Any gap you hear is yours to close, now, while it is cheap.

Once the task is clear, turn to the person.

TRY IT WITH AI

Here is my brief: [paste the brief]. Read it as the person receiving it. Tell me what is unclear, and what you would assume that I have not said.

The two-minute version

A small task doesn't need the full conversation. Four sentences are enough.

1. **Purpose.** "This is for..."
2. **Done.** "Good looks like..."
3. **First look.** "Show me a rough version by..."
4. **Playback.** "Tell me what you have heard."

Questions to ask

Pick three or four. This is a conversation, not a checklist.

THEIR UNDERSTANDING

- What are you taking as the purpose of this work?
- What do you see as in scope?
- What is still unclear?

THEIR EXPERIENCE

- What similar work have you done before?
- What did you learn from it?
- Where do you expect this to get hard?

THEIR SUPPORT

- What do you need from me?
- What else do you need before you start?
- What would you need to put down to do this well?
- Who else needs to be involved?
- How would you like feedback on this?

THEIR DEVELOPMENT

- What would you like to get out of this work for yourself?

TRY IT WITH AI

I am commissioning [piece of work] from someone who [their experience with this kind of work]. Suggest five open questions, one idea in each, that would show me how they understand the work and what they need from me.

A one-page brief

Fill this in before the conversation or, better, fill it in together.

THE BRIEF	NOTES
Purpose: what it is for and who will use it	
Done: what good looks like	
Good enough: where to stop	
First look: what I want to see, and when	
Fixed: what can't change	
Yours to decide	
Check-ins: when and how	
How close I will be, and why	
Making room: what they will stop or slow	

While the work is under way

Agree how you will keep an eye on the work before it starts. Then a check-in is expected, not a surprise.

Being checked on can feel like a threat. David Rock's SCARF model names five things people protect at work: status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness. A clear brief gives certainty. Real decisions give autonomy. Saying why you are staying close protects status.

- **Put the check-ins in the diary.** Set the dates and stages in the commissioning conversation.

- **Ask for the first look early.** A rough outline is cheaper to redirect than a finished draft.
- **Ask three questions each time.** Where is it up to? What is in the way? What do you need from me?
- **Ask for intent, not permission.** This is David Marquet's Intent-Based Leadership. They tell you "I intend to..." and what they have weighed up. You speak only if you see a problem.
- **Hold to the level you chose.** If you said hand over, hand over. If you need to move closer, say so and say why.
- **Ask before you fix.** When you feel the urge to step in, ask a question first.

A simple shared view saves you asking for updates. One line per piece of work, looked at weekly, is enough.

WORK	OWNER	HOW CLOSE	NEXT CHECK-IN	WHERE IT IS UP TO

TRY IT WITH AI

Here are my notes on the work my team has under way: [paste your notes]. Give me one line for each piece of work: the owner, the next check-in, where it is up to, and anything that looks stuck.

When the work comes back

Review the work against what you asked for, not against the version in your head.

- **Start with the brief.** What did you ask for, and does this meet it?
- **Separate different from wrong.** If it meets the brief but isn't how you would have done it, it meets the brief.
- **Find where the gap opened.** If the work misses, was the gap in the work or in the ask? If it was the ask, say so.
- **Be specific.** Use the Center for Creative Leadership's Situation, Behaviour, Impact: "In Tuesday's draft, the recommendation was on page four, so the reader had to hunt for the ask."
- **Match the feedback to the stage.** Rough thinking gets feedback on the thinking, not the commas.
- **Pause before you take it back.** Ask what the person would need to finish it well.
- **Close the loop.** Agree what you will each do differently next time.

TRY IT WITH AI

Here is the brief I gave: [paste the brief]. Here is my draft feedback: [paste your feedback]. Tell me whether it is specific and whether it judges the work against the brief. Then rewrite it as situation, behaviour, impact.

If giving feedback is hard, look upstream: how was the work asked for in the first place?