Leverage Frees Best Work

Idea In Short

Run teams on opportunity cost. Give every task to the cheapest person who can reliably do it, so senior people stay free for the work only they can do. Junior professionals who volunteer for grinder tasks understand the leverage model, and they are raising their own rate by learning.

The Best Sentence a Manager Can Hear

"Let me get lunch. I am the cheapest person here." A junior consultant saying this makes a manager's day, and not for the obvious reasons. It has nothing to do with dodging the lunch run, which managers should do regularly, and nothing to do with being busy that day. The sentence is beautiful because it means the speaker understands consulting. It combines confidence and humility in the correct proportions: confidence about important things, humility about small ones.

Consulting Is About Leverage

That junior consultant, call him Ted, implicitly understood how consulting firms make money. The business runs on a leverage model in which senior resources win the business, scope the problems and then get out of the way so junior consultants can effectively do the work. The operating rule is simple: give the work to the cheapest person on the team who can reliably do it. Ted was saying, in effect, that he was the grinder with the lowest opportunity cost, so efficiency itself sent him for the sandwiches.1

Isn't That a Cold Way to Value People?

The question deserves a careful answer. There is dignity in all work that adds value, breaks no law and gives joy, and plenty of professions pay less than they should, teachers, nurses and public defenders among them. Within a professional services business, though, the apprentice is learning on the job and actively becoming more valuable. Junior professionals raise their own bill rate with every skill acquired, cheaper for now and getting more expensive by design. Every attorney billing a thousand dollars per hour started as a two-hundred-dollar associate. The leverage model is not a caste system. It is a moving escalator, and volunteering for the grinder work is how you ride it upward.

Ted, for the record, is simply a good person. He opens doors, warms up the car on cold days and would fetch lunch out of pure character. The instructive part is his reasoning. His offer was not deference to authority or some ideal of hierarchy and harmony. It was team economics. Healthcare has the perfect phrase: everyone should work at the top of their license, doing the most unique, needed and specialized thing they can do. Stated as arithmetic, 400-dollar-per-hour people should not do 200-dollar-per-hour work, and the 200-dollar person who takes that work is freeing the senior person for higher-value activity. Both framings describe the same healthy team.

Delegation Done Right

The corporate word for all this is delegation, and good delegation checks several boxes at once. The recipient carries a lower bill rate than you. The recipient can learn from the experience, which converts cost savings into capability building. The handoff frees you for work only you can do. Both sides understand the implicit reciprocity involved, and the relationship carries enough trust in both directions to survive mistakes. Delegation missing any of these elements degrades into dumping, and teams can tell the difference immediately.

The counter-case proves the rule. When junior consultants start feeling privileged and refuse certain kinds of work, something upstream has broken: the shared understanding of what client service requires, the team's agreement about who does which work, the goal-setting about what each person wants to learn or the storming and norming a team needs before it performs. Standing advice for anyone starting a job: say yes a lot and show the desire to be a team player, be coachable and worthy of coaching, and earn the right to say no, politely and politically, over time through accumulated relational equity. Complaining from day one forfeits the whole game.

Servant Leadership Closes the Loop

The leverage model only stays humane when leadership serves it from above. Servant leadership means the manager's job is getting out of the way of the team, supplying tools, direction and trust, then absorbing obstacles rather than creating them.2 Gestures at every scale sustain the culture, from a chief executive at Lenovo directing his three-million-dollar bonus to the lowest-paid workers to a partner slowing down for genuine coaching time with a consultant.3 Sacrificial attitude at the top licenses sacrificial attitude below, and a team where both flow freely outperforms any collection of individually brilliant hoarders.

The Weekly Leverage Audit

Managers can operationalize the principle with a short recurring review. List your ten biggest time consumers from the past week and mark each one: only I can do this, someone else could do this with coaching, or nobody should do this at all. The middle category is the leverage frontier, because every task there is a development opportunity for someone junior and a capacity gain for you. Delegate one item from that column each week, with context and a quality bar rather than a script. Track what the freed hours actually produced, since leverage that dissolves into more meetings is leverage wasted. Over a quarter, the audit compounds into a team where each person operates at the top of their capability, which is the definition the best sentence was pointing at all along.

Teach Clients the Same Economics

The lesson exports directly to clients. One client executive was caught up in menial activities, and the honest advice was blunt: this wastes your time, so delegate it to someone cheaper than yourself. The principle generalizes into a sentence worth repeating in any organization. If someone else can do the job, give the work away, and only do the work that only you can do, because anything else means the company is overpaying to have it done. Leverage, correctly understood, is not about squeezing juniors. It is about freeing every person on the team to do the best work they are uniquely capable of, and the lunch run is simply where the philosophy shows its face.

- 1Opportunity cost
- 2Servant leadership
- 3Lenovo

Summary

Consulting runs on leverage: seniors win and scope work while juniors execute and learn, raising their own value. Delegation is team economics, not disrespect, and servant leaders clear the way. Teach clients the same lesson, since companies overpay whenever the wrong person does the work.