

HR BY ZAPIER · MANAGER SKILLS ARE AI SKILLS

The management instincts you already use for people apply to AI too



Adaptive Delegation for People and AI

How to decide how much oversight a person or an AI tool needs — using the same management instincts you already have

WHO THIS IS FOR

People managers and team leads deciding how much to oversee AI — and their teams — on real work.

WHAT YOU'LL LEAVE WITH

A simple way to match oversight level to risk and capability, for people and AI using the same framework.

Emily Mabie · AI Innovation Lead, Zapier

A standalone guide for managers, learning and development (L&D) teams, and People leadership

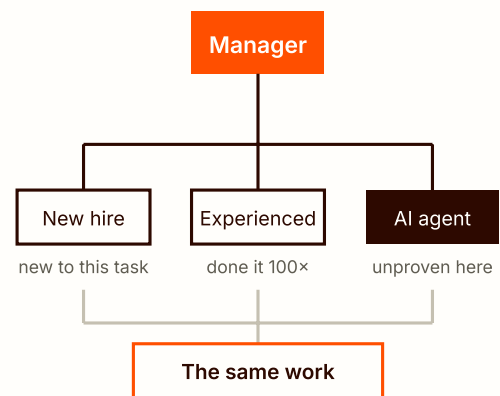
Your delegation muscle already works — AI is just a new name on the roster

Every manager decides how much to hand off based on who's doing the work and what happens if it goes wrong. You already do this for new hires, experienced team members, and contractors without thinking about it.

AI assistants, AI agents, and automations are new names on the same problem. The real question isn't whether to use AI. It's **how much oversight this delegatee needs right now.**

ONE ROSTER, THREE DELEGATEES

The same task, handed to three different delegates. Each needs a different level of oversight — based on their track record on this task, not their seniority.



THREE TERMS THIS GUIDE USES

Adaptive delegation

Matching how closely you supervise to two things: how capable the delegatee is **at this specific task**, and how costly it is if the work goes wrong.

Delegatee

Anyone — or anything — you hand work to: a direct report, a contractor, an AI agent (an AI tool that takes action on its own), or an automation.

Workflow

A repeating process your team runs — onboarding, ticket triage, monthly reporting.

You don't need a new management framework for AI. You need to apply the one you already have.

Treating AI as "special" breaks the management muscle you already have

01 Skipping oversight by default

Teams hand high-risk work to brand-new AI tools because "it's just AI" — or drop oversight on a junior team member because "they have an AI assistant now." Same failure, different label.

02 Wrong fit, scaled up

Handing work that needs close coaching to a brand-new AI tool with no rules, approvals, or limits — or automating high-stakes decisions just to hit usage goals.

03 Humans left holding ambiguity

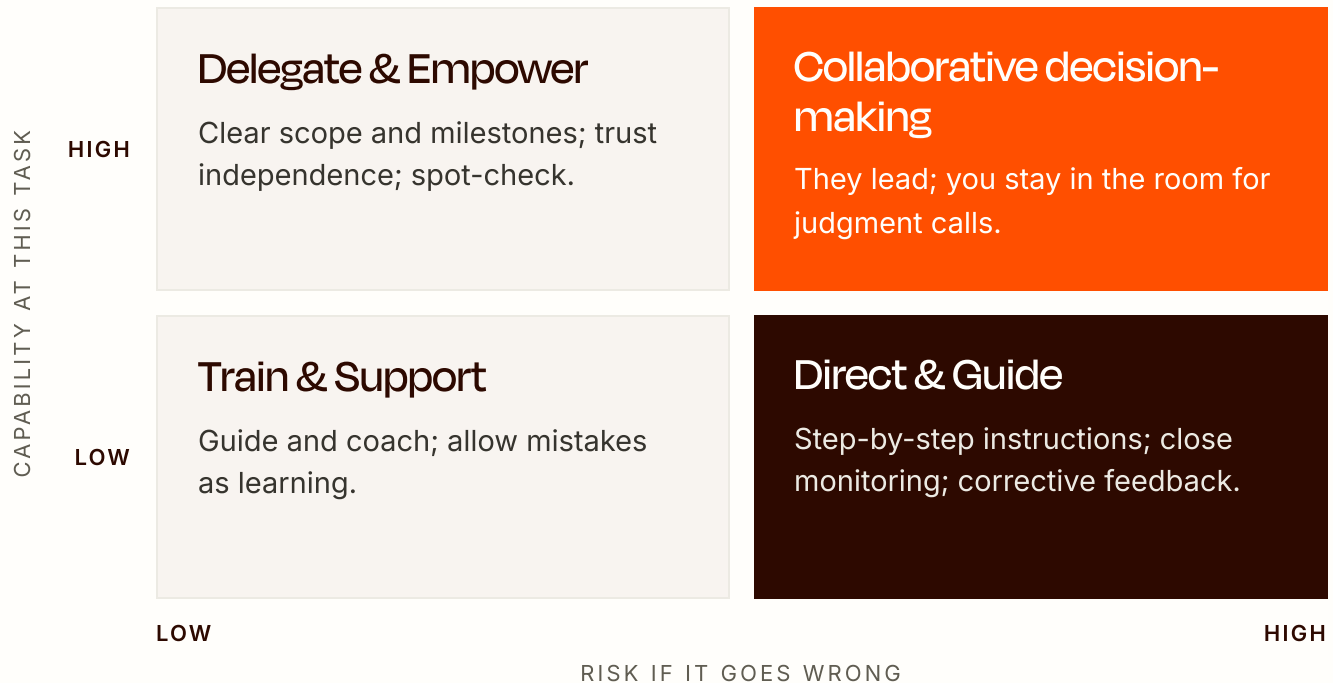
Someone on your team still owns the outcome. If you set up the AI tool carefully but never had that conversation with the person accountable for the result, you created a gap no dashboard will close.

Adaptive delegation was built for people. It still works when the delegatee is an AI tool, a workflow, or an agent. The two questions don't change.

The next page introduces the four oversight modes and the 2×2 grid this guide is built on.

One grid, four oversight modes — for a person or an AI tool

Ask two questions about the work: **how capable this delegatee is at this task**, and **how costly it is if the work goes wrong**. Your answers land the work in one of the four boxes below. Each box names the oversight mode that fits.



MAKE THE IMPLICIT EXPLICIT

With people, you can leave nuance unsaid and still get reasonable judgment. With AI, the work you skip spelling out becomes the failure mode. Prompts, rules, and approval gates aren't micromanagement. They're how you turn tacit manager knowledge into something a model can run.

Capability is per task — not per person or per tool. An HR leader with 30 years of experience can be low capability on a task they've never done before. Someone junior with deep practice in one narrow task can be high. The same is true of AI: a tool proven on one workflow starts over on the next. Rate the pairing of delegatee and task, and re-rate it as they prove reliability.

The same workflow, sorted twice

The examples below show the same workflow placed on the Page 4 grid twice: once for a direct report, once for an AI tool. Same two questions, different answers.

DIRECT REPORT EXAMPLES	AI TOOL EXAMPLES (same work)
New hire drafting internal comms Train & Support	New AI agent on low-stakes ticket tagging Train & Support — written instructions, examples, review every output at first
Junior analyst on board deck numbers Direct & Guide	New or unproven AI tool on customer-facing replies Direct & Guide — rules, human approval before anything sends
Experienced team member running a standing report Delegate & Empower	Proven automation on a stable, monitored workflow Delegate & Empower — milestones, spot checks
Senior engineer on an architecture tradeoff Collaborative decision-making	AI tool on pay or HR policy edge cases Collaborative decision-making — a person leads the judgment, AI supports

WHY AI SKEWS JUNIOR

People learn from context, feedback, and judgment you never wrote down. Models don't. Most agents stay "new hire" until you invest in scoping, examples, and boundaries. That's why adaptive delegation starts with more upfront definition for AI, not less supervision because "it's just automation."

If you wouldn't hand this work to a new direct report and walk away, don't hand it to a brand-new AI tool and walk away either.

BEFORE / AFTER		
Before: "AI is different, we need new rules"	Before: AI usage dashboards in the staff meeting	Before: The manager sets up the tool and stops there
After: The same two questions — capability and risk — for people and AI tools	After: A named oversight mode for each delegatee	After: The manager sets oversight for the person, the tool, and who owns the outcome

Manager gut check: nailing your next AI handoff

All three use the Page 4 grid — capability at this task × risk if it goes wrong. Answer them using the worksheet on the follow page.

- 1 Pick a workflow you handed to an AI tool this month. Name the mode it got. Would a person of the same capability at that task get the same?
- 2 Pick a direct report's top task and name the mode that fits. If they started using AI on it, should your oversight change?
- 3 Who owns the outcome when the AI tool or automation fails — and do they know it?

FACILITATOR RUN-OF-SHOW (45 min)

- 1 **Frame (5 min):** "Where did your last AI rollout start — a problem or a demo?"
- 2 **Teach the grid (10 min):** Capability and risk, using one workflow from the room.
- 3 **Fill in Page 7 (20 min):** One task for a direct report, one for an AI tool. Pairs compare modes and what they'll do differently.
- 4 **Close (10 min):** Pairs work the three questions above, then each manager names one oversight mode they'll change next week.

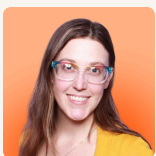
NEXT STEP

Run a 45-minute manager session on adaptive delegation for people and AI

If you want a facilitator, or workflows in your HR and People systems with clear rules, approvals, and ownership, talk to your Zapier account team.

[Talk to sales →](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



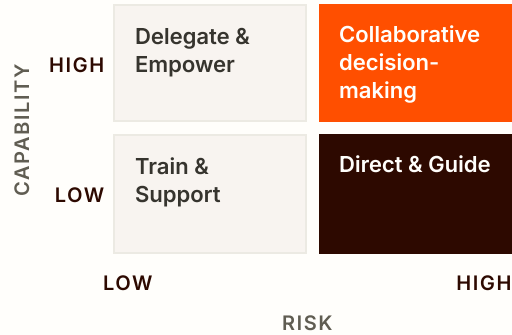
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Two assignments, same framework

Pick one task you'll give a direct report and one you'll give an AI tool. For each, ask how capable they are at this specific task and how costly it is if the work goes wrong. Your answers land you in one of four oversight modes. Then write what you'll actually do to supervise.



DIRECT REPORT

Task I'm assigning

Capability at this task ☐ Low ☐ High Risk if it goes wrong ☐ Low ☐ High

Oversight mode

☐ Train & Support ☐ Direct & Guide ☐ Delegate & Empower ☐ Collaborative decision-making

How I'll supervise (check-ins, coaching, approvals, milestones)

Who owns the outcome if this fails — and do they know it?

AI TOOL

Task I'm assigning

Capability at this task ☐ Low ☐ High Risk if it goes wrong ☐ Low ☐ High

Oversight mode

☐ Train & Support ☐ Direct & Guide ☐ Delegate & Empower ☐ Collaborative decision-making

How I'll supervise (prompts, examples, review gates, human approval before send)

Who owns the outcome if this fails — and do they know it?

Bonus: Is there one workflow where both a direct report and an AI tool touch the work? Plot each separately. Do they need the same oversight mode?