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By Rick Boxx

Pitfalls Of The 'Peter Principle'

Years ago, the business world became captivated by a book called *The Peter Principle*, authored by Dr. Laurence J. Peter. The book focused on a common pitfall of leadership advancement: If we continually promote high performers, we will eventually advance them to a level of incompetence. In other words, success in one level of endeavor does not guarantee success in levels of greater authority and responsibility.

Even though Dr. Peter's book was first published more than 40 years ago, this "Peter Principle" continues being practiced today, often to the detriment of individuals and the organizations that employ them. According to the *Harvard Business Review*, researchers Alan Benson and Kelly Shue tested this theory by studying how well sales people performed when promoted to sales management positions.

Benson and Shue discovered high-performing salespeople often were not good managers, affirming the Peter Principle. When offered a promotion, some people accept it for the additional compensation that comes with it. Or they take the new position out of pride, desiring status or authority that goes with it, rather than to humbly and honestly consider their skill sets, evaluating whether the proposed role would be the best fit for them. Failing to perceive they could become "square pegs" struggling to fit into "round holes" can lead to unnecessary failure.

For instance, people whose persuasive and people skills enable them to excel in sales might lack the necessary leadership or administrative skills to

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effectively handle the challenges of managing and directing others. Such a promotion could prove to be more of a penalty than a reward.

The consequences of moving high performers into very different new roles are significant on several levels. For a company, ideally every individual would be situated in positions where they can both excel and thrive. The adage about a chain being only as strong as its weakest link applies to people being promoted beyond their capabilities.

In sports, not all stellar athletes are suited to experience equal success as managers, coaches or sports executives. Similarly, promoting someone to a role that requires different skills and gifts can prove frustrating for everyone. Some individuals may find great joy and fulfillment in their current position, but become miserable in another role for which they are ill-suited. At the same time, those assigned to report to them could become stifled in their own productivity.

The Bible offers insight into how to avoid this dilemma:

Seek wisdom to discern how best to utilize people's talents and abilities. Effective leaders learn to understand the people who work for them - their skills, interests, goals and limitations. Advancement decisions should be made with all of those factors in mind. *"Be sure you know the condition of your flocks, give careful attention to your herds" (Proverbs 27:23).*

Do not let pride or ambition misdirect your career. Without question, excellence should be recognized and rewarded. *"Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men" (Proverbs 22:29).* However, ambition and the desire for recognition can lead to poor career decisions. *Proverbs 29:23 teaches, "A man's pride will bring him low, but a humble spirit will obtain honor."*

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If you desire honor for your work, concentrate on what you do best and ask your company to reward your successes appropriately.

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Reflection/Discussion Question

1. When you hear the term "Peter Principle," what comes to your mind?
2. Have you seen this Peter Principle in action during your work experience? Has it ever directly affected you, or people with whom you have worked? Explain your answer.
3. What are some of the consequences of promoting people "to their levels of incompetence"? Or to state it a bit more kindly, beyond their levels of competence?
4. How can a good leader discern whether a high performer in the company is suited to receive a promotion, or should just be recognized and rewarded for their work and remain in the same position? Similarly, how can someone honestly evaluate whether they should accept a promotion if offered, when they are highly effective in the work they are currently doing?

NOTE:

If you have a Bible and would like to read more about this subject, consider the following passages:

Proverbs 11:2, 12:9, 15:33, 16:18; Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:12-26

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