

The Seduction of Functional Competence

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When you started your career, your boss expected you to build functional competence in some particular aspect of the business. Let me offer a few examples of functional competence.

As an engineer, you're expected to master the principles of math and physics, applying them to specific projects or products. As an insurance agent, you're expected to learn the organization's products, then educate consumers on the advantages of those products over what they currently have. As a construction worker, you're expected to acquire and install physical materials consistent with the specifications provided to you.

Your functional duties grew during your first years of work. As you acquired more skills, you were recognized with additional responsibility and commensurate pay increases. These rewards were a function of your improved productivity, increased quality, and greater efficiency.

Companies in every product and service area create methods for training unskilled new employees to a level where they can contribute. They also encourage individuals to expand their functional competence to deeper and broader levels.

I'm always curious as to how future leaders of the organization are developed. Unfortunately, *The Peter Principle*, identified in a book from forty years ago, is repeated daily. Those who excel at functional skills are typically promoted to management positions, often with insufficient skills to fill the role.

Dr. Laurence J. Peter and Raymond Hull, authors of the 1969 book, point out that members of organizational hierarchies are promoted as long as they work competently. Ultimately, they can be promoted to a position where they are not competent (their "level of incompetency"). Unless demoted (which occurs rarely), there they remain, making life difficult for all those under their authority.

When I ask leaders about their organization's leadership development process, I am usually told about the methodology for developing functional skills. Organizations realize they cannot survive without a process for transitioning a new employee into a competent producer. However, many organizations seem woefully ignorant of the need to develop future leaders.

Promotions certainly occur, and they are often based on length of service, amount of formal education, or involvement in a variety of different projects. Often, the promoted individual feels terribly unprepared. The skills to manage a process or lead a team are very different from the functional skills required to support a service or product.

Rarely, however, does the promoted individual say anything. Who is willing to admit inadequacy when they've just been promoted? So, they try. They bumble. They attempt to fill the roles that have been given to them. And the people under their authority suffer. The organization suffers.

Functional skills do not prepare an individual to resolve conflict, deal with ambiguous situations, motivate team members, listen with patience, delegate properly, effectively communicate (both verbally and in written form), confront inadequate performance, and the many other issues a manager faces.

Further, as the world of work continues to evolve, the difficulties managers face are becoming more demanding. Managers in the past directed physical laborers. These folks used the strength of their backs and the dexterity of their hands to generate a tangible product.

Today we have "knowledge workers," individuals who manipulate data, make meaning of information, and develop new concepts. Often, these employees are more technically competent than their bosses.

These are stressful conditions. Managers who face these situations unprepared may choose to leave the organization. Some of their direct reports may choose to leave the organization. This unanticipated loss of skilled talent is never a welcome occurrence.

There are two approaches that can help reduce inappropriate managerial promotions. First, generate a route other than “promotion to management” for recognition and salary growth for outstanding individuals who prefer to remain as individual producers.

Next, provide within the organization a system for building the many skills that leaders and managers need to inspire and align knowledge workers to the long-term vision and purpose of the organization.

If Dr. Laurence J. Peter were here today, he’d agree that leadership skills are something very different from functional competence. An effective leadership development process is a huge benefit!

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