

The Seduction of Functional Competence

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When you started your career, you were expected to build functional and technical competencies in some unique role within your organization. Let me offer a few examples of functional competence.

As an engineer, you master the principles of math and physics, applying them to specific projects or products. As an insurance agent, you learn the organization's products, then educate consumers on the advantages of those products over what they currently have. As a construction worker, you 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 result of your improved productivity, increased quality and reliability, and greater effectiveness.

Organizations 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 and technical competence to deeper and broader levels.

As an executive coach, I'm always curious as to how future leaders of the organization--as differentiated from functional or technical "experts"--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 leadership skills to fill the role.

Dr. Laurence J. Peter and Raymond Hull, authors of the 1969 book, identify the reality that competent contributors are considered for promotion when vacancies occur. Ultimately, they can be promoted to a position where they are not yet competent (their "level of incompetence"). Unless demoted (which occurs rarely), there they remain, making life difficult for themselves and 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 team member into a competent individual producer. However, many organizations seem woefully ignorant of the need to develop skills for influencing and engaging others.

Promotions certainly occur, and they are often based on length of service, formal education, results personally generated, or involvement in projects. Often, the promoted individual feels (and is) unprepared to guide and support the efforts of other individuals. Success as a competent individual producer does not correlate with success as a leader. The skills to lead a team or manage a process are vastly different from the functional and technical skills required to support a service or product.

Rarely, however, do the promoted individuals say anything. Who is willing to admit inadequacy when they've just been promoted? So, they try. They bumble. They seek to understand and fill the roles now expected of them. And the people under their authority suffer. The team suffers (and team members complain privately to each other). The organization suffers. The organization's customers suffer.

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 build the leadership skills of others.

Further, as the world of work continues to evolve, the difficulties leaders face are becoming more demanding. In the past, managers directed physical laborers. These folks used the strength of their backs and the dexterity of their hands to generate a tangible product. The managers conceived the work that was needed, planned and organized the processes and resources required to accomplish it, and directed the individuals executing the work.

Today we have “knowledge workers,” individuals who manipulate data, make meaning of the gathered information, and generate new concepts, services, and products. Often, these team members are more intellectually gifted and technically competent than their managers.

These are stressful conditions for a leader. Those who face these situations, and some of their direct reports, may choose to leave the organization due to their frustrations or the inability to improve the working conditions. Unanticipated loss of skilled talent is expensive and never a welcome occurrence.

Two approaches can help reduce inappropriate managerial promotions. One is to generate a route other than “promotion to management” for recognition and salary growth for outstanding individuals who love serving as individual producers.

Second, provide within the organization a system for building the skills that leaders and managers need for inspiring and aligning knowledge workers to the long-term vision and purpose of the organization.

If Dr. Laurence J. Peter were here today, he would agree that leadership skills are something quite different from functional and technical competence. An effective **leadership** development process is a necessity for any organization that expects to sustain itself! And not just for those at the top of the hierarchy. Enhancing the quality of leadership throughout the organization should be considered a strategic initiative for any organization that wants to approach genuine excellence!

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