

Who Promoted Peter?

Note: This is part one of a three-part series about Peter.

So, who was it that promoted Peter?

Peter did a great job. He consistently helped his department to increase revenue. All of his paperwork was completed on time and in order. He led an efficient team. His boss thought he could handle a full division.

But Peter failed with rockets red glare.

The Peter Principle holds that, “In a hierarchy, every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence.”

The Peter Principle wasn't named after a guy who failed. The principle was authored by Laurence Peter, who observed the principle in action and wrote a book about it in 1969. The book is titled *The Peter Principle*. It's available online and worth reading.

The principle seems to be one of the most bandied about thoughts in modern management. Employees joke about their boss, Peter. It's a disparaging reference to their observation that the boss is in over his head.

Peter recognized that people who were good at something frequently got promoted into something they were not good at. Rather than admit a mistake, some C-level leaders hang on to the newly incompetent in the hope that better performance will pop out of a magic hat.

The promotion came because the worker got things done at one level. Often with a promotion, the organization loses in two ways. Production declines when the promoted leaves his department. And the division suffers because the new guy met Peter. The promoted manager begins to hear talk about his great potential instead of his excellent performance.

An observation is that the promoted incompetents are rarely fired. Employees learn to work around, dance around and not be around the odorous. Yes, incompetence tends to be pungent. Decay reeks.

Peter observed that the hierarchy must be protected at all costs.

Promotion in leadership should not be based on some metric of output. People who are good at producing output will not necessarily become good leaders. We must look at other markers for signs of leadership.

Look for people who:

- Give no excuses and welcome accountability
- Create solutions to problems
- Demonstrate a passion for learning
- Show others by demonstration
- Lead the informal organization

Test a future leader with assignments and projects that require teamwork. If you are hiring a leader from outside of the organization, look for demonstrated leadership markers rather than quantitative claims of success.

Selecting a new leader is a demonstration of competence.