

## Plane ceiling

**By Stuart White**  
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How many times have you wondered how certain senior appointments have been made when the patent unsuitability of it leaves us flabbergasted? Yet it often happens because organisations all too frequently confuse technical competence with managerial potential, mistakenly believing that a demonstration of the abilities, skills or habits necessary to perform one organisational function at one level is proof positive of a latent competence to succeed at a higher level. Sadly they learn the costly lesson too late that it's usually only in a bottle of milk that the cream rises naturally to the top.

Whilst studying I learnt about the Peter Principle, a little gem of wisdom, which seems to have disappeared from consulting talk and corporate boardrooms, yet is as relevant and prevalent today as it was when first identified forty years ago. Formulated by Dr. Laurence J Peter in his book of the same name, the Peter Principle examines how staff are assessed and considered potentially good enough for promotion based solely on adequacy of performance in their current position, so that people performing their job competently will in all probability be promoted and keep being promoted until they find themselves in a position they are unable to properly fulfill. At this point they will have found their final resting place, having risen – eventually - to their own level of incompetence. This means that the higher up you look in any organisation, the more non-functioning sinecures and ineffective managers you will find.

Consider this practical example. The pilot who is outstanding in his job gets promoted to Chief Pilot, the person in charge of all the other pilots. Sounds logical, but ironically in spite of the job title, this is a non-flying function and requires totally different competencies. So potentially this results in a double whammy for the airline - it loses its best pilot and gains an incompetent manager. The employee becomes less useful because the skills that made him a success (usually technical/specialist) are no longer of use in his new function at the higher level. The real problem with this approach to management succession is that the employee's performance at one particular stratum is used to predict success at another, higher level but whilst jobs higher up the ladder may not be more difficult, you can bet your bottom dollar they will be different and much more complex!

But complexity is often ignored when considering a person's fit with the job – both the complexity of the role and the person's capability to handle it. Most people do not recognise the difference between difficult and complex and in fact use the two words interchangeably. To understand that there is a distinct difference between the two, let's take the pilot analogy a step further. Think about their job. There is no doubt that it is difficult, and proof of this is that you have to combine years of study with hours of flying time to qualify. But thereafter, the job consists of carrying out a series of instructions and procedures relating to an aircraft's 'how to' manual. Generally one flight is not too different from the next. The pilot comes to work, is told which aeroplane to fly, destination, altitude, co-ordinates - even the runway is selected for him. The farthest he/she has to think is probably the duration of the flight or at most the next fortnight's schedule. On the face of it all pretty mechanical, predictable and concrete really. Difficult, yes, complex, no!

By contrast the CEO of the airline arrives at work to face a very different array of tasks. With more variables, a great deal of uncertainty and little predictability, he has to deal with numerous stakeholders all with multiple agendas (competitors, executive board, customers, employees, unions, business owners, peers), track and respond to events which may be happening globally and affect business, and effectively oversee the entire airline and industry function. He is not told which direction to go in - he has to make that executive decision himself after taking all the variables and uncertainties into consideration – and if he is not thinking ahead at least 5 years or if he has got his thinking wrong, then the airline will likely be out of business and himself out of a job. Overall he operates in a world of uncertainty where issues and challenges are twisted together and intertwined. Consider the Icelandic volcanic ash eruption earlier this year which grounded all major airlines around the world for days with all its logistical and economic consequences – complex doesn't begin to cover it. Formulating the strategies to ride out such operational disasters is what separates the corporate men from the boys and explains why the former earn the big bucks. And that's why you should never take the experienced pilot and promote him to CEO of the airline, because the skills and competencies for these two jobs are poles apart.

Of course performance excellence should be recognised with appropriate promotions and pay increases, but only in accordance with abilities and aptitudes. The trick to avoid falling prey to the Peter Principle is to stop staff one level short of the glass ceiling. Make sure it has been properly reinforced so they cannot mistakenly crash through because all that broken glass flying around could be lethal!

Agree or disagree with this? Don's twitter amongst yourselves – tweet your chirps to [http://twitter.com/Stuart\\_Botswana](http://twitter.com/Stuart_Botswana)

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