

The Peter Principle: Is This Phenomenon in Decline or Growing? A Review

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ABSTRACT

The Peter Principle—that individuals in an organization rise to their levels of incompetence—represents potential problems for all employees. Wondering if the Peter Principle still applies, I revisited Dr. Peter's and Hull's study of 1969, "The Peter Principle—Why Things Always Go Wrong", which achieved best-seller status and soon became a part of the lexicon of the business world.

I studied, through a review of the current literature on this topic (2009 – Current), whether the Peter Principle is still in effect. This paper shows that the Peter Principle, the phenomenon in which employees, around the world, are said to rise to their level of incompetence, is still prevalent and active today and that little regarding its use has changed since 1969.

The behaviors embodied in the Peter Principle still have disrupting effects that occur only too frequently in organizations. As a result, the Peter Principle cannot be ignored. Its effects, however, can be remedied through extensive training of those who are promoted. I also conclude that occupational incompetence is always seen through the eyes of others.

Keywords: *competence, incompetence, Peter Principle, promotion, universal phenomenon*

DEFINITION

The Peter Principle, an ingenious fifty-year-old idea, one that is decoded in a multifactor context, is based on a study in which researchers collected data, in the form of hundreds of case histories, by observing overt behavior and avoiding introspection or inferences.

Dr. Laurence J. Peter (1969), best known for the Peter Principle, was a Canadian educator and sociologist by trade, taught at the University of British Columbia before becoming a professor of education at the University of Southern California (Taylor, 1969), concluded that an employee's process of climbing up the hierarchical ladder in an organization can go on indefinitely until the employee reaches a position where he or she is no longer competent and is, therefore, regarded as *incompetent*. Further, he theorized that in a hierarchy (i.e., any/every type of organization): "every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence" (Peter, 1969, p. 26). Peter also stated that as employees move upward through the pecking order or chain of command, they do worse, as managers, than they did before having been promoted. And this phenomenon is not limited in scope. "Sooner or later, this could happen to every employee in every hierarchy—business, industry, trade-unions, politics, government, armed forces, religion, and education" (Peter, 1969, p. 24). More so, his view was that one will advance to one's highest level of competence and consequently get promoted to a position where one will be inept.

His first book, *The Peter Principle—Why Things Always Go Wrong*, contains many real-world examples and thought-provoking explanations of human behavior, including: "Every organization contained a number of persons who could not do their jobs and occupational incompetence is everywhere" (Peter, 1969, p. 20).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In 2009, my colleague and I published an article, in *The Journal of Global Business Management*, called: *The Peter Principle: Is This Universal Phenomenon in Decline or Growing?* 10 years ago, we asked the question: Why is research still needed about the Peter Principle that was developed forty years ago? Peter (1969, p. 20) affirmed that: “Occupational incompetence is everywhere. Have you noticed it? Probably we all have noticed it.”

Later, Peter (1985, p. 28) wrote, in a follow-up book, in *Why Things Go Wrong, or the Peter Principle Revisited*, that:

I named it The Peter Principle because it described a generalization or a tendency and not something inevitable. . . The system encourages individuals to climb to their levels of incompetence. If you are able to do your job efficiently and with ease, you will be told your job lacks challenge and you should move up. The problem [however] is that when you find something you can't do very well, that is where you stay, bungling the job, frustrating your co-workers, and eroding the effectiveness of the organization.

Over the years, a small number of researchers has been studying and publishing on the Peter Principle. Cummings (1971) wrote that the incompetencies that can be attributed to the Peter Principle are so many and varied that a second book would barely do justice to the original work. According to Floyd (1993), the Peter Principle is a potential problem for all employees, whether professionals or employees at lower levels. And research continues to show substantial evidence of this phenomenon that after workers are promoted some do worse than they did before their promotion (Fairburn & Malcolmson, 2000; Faria, 2000).

McCue (2008, p.1) summed up the situation this way: When workers perform well in a given position, they are eventually promoted to a higher one, with more responsibilities and challenges. If they perform well in that position, they proceed up the ladder to the next one. This process repeats over and over until people assume a position that they aren't so good at, and that's where they stay.

The proficiency of an employee is determined not by outsiders but by his or her superior in the hierarchy. At that point, the upward process usually stops since the recognized rules of bureaucracies make it very difficult to demote someone, even if that person would fit in much better and would be much happier in a lower job. The net result is that most of the higher levels of a bureaucracy will be filled by inept people, managers, who got there because they were good at doing a task different than the new one they are expected to do.

As I read Peter's various works, it is clear to me that the Peter Principle is not a law (e.g., directive, edict, or ruling) but just a generalized principle (e.g., attitude, belief, or opinion) based only on the researcher's own studies. Further, it explains just a general trend or direction and is not a hard-and-fast rule. Also, the employee's ineptitude is not necessarily exposed as a result of the higher-ranking management position being more difficult but rather—simply—that the job is different from the position in which the employee previously excelled and thus requires different work skills that the employee, now a manager, usually does not possess. In fact, Peter (1985, p. 64) mentions: “The statement that individuals tend to rise to their levels of incompetence does not absolutely require an explanation for individuals who prefer to stay at their levels of competence.” Because it is only a principle, a tenet, and not etched in stone, exceptions do not have to be identified or explained, at least according to Peter (1985).

Today, 50 years since Peter brought up the issue of incompetence, I believe more exploration is still needed in this highly debatable and stimulating philosophy. As such, I have presented an assessment, in a review format, of what has been studied about the Peter Principle in the last 10 years.

METHODOLOGY

Having researched and published about this all-important topic 10 years ago, I wanted to better understand if the concept of the Peter Principle is still in effect today in business. More specifically, my research question is: Is This Phenomenon in Decline or Growing (i.e., 2009-Current)?

In this study, strictly in an evaluation format, I looked at the research work of 32 writers and scholars about this topic over the past 10 years. In doing so, I went to OneSearch (2019), at my school's library, drilled down to ABI/Inform Collection, Business Source Premier, Academic Search Premier, and Gale Academic Onefile, and typed in the search bar the words "Peter Principle, 2009 – Current."

Of the 139 articles provided from these specific search words, I randomly selected 40 critiques that were written about this topic over the last 10 years. These 40 pieces were selected because the overview section of this extensive list included the key words—Peter Principle. Of the 40 commentaries and reviews that were selected, 32 (i.e., or 80%) were used in this study's write-up, because they were closely related to what I am trying to find out—Is the Peter Principle in Decline or Growing? I also wrote a brief review, in the Review of the Current Literature section, of 16 different commentaries about the Peter Principle. In addition, I included one published peer-reviewed article of my published work.

REVIEW OF THE CURRENT LITERATURE

The following review of the literature encompasses a series of scholarly works about the Peter Principle that are directly and indirectly related to this study. These works, limited in nature and time (2009 – current), are presented chronologically to highlight development of the thinking of various writers about this provocative topic over the past fifty years.

I specifically approached the literature review from a chronological perspective even though it has time-line gaps. I chose this method rather than a content-oriented tactic so that the reader can clearly understand the thinking, even if it might appear to be disjointed and conflicting in nature, that has been taking place by a few researchers over the past 10 years.

In 2009, Risk Management Society Publishing, Inc. (RIMS) issued a review of the book by Peter and Hull (1969):

The Peter Principle is a flash of brilliance so profound that examples of it in practice instantly come to mind. It explains every bureaucracy that gets nothing done, every painfully ignorant boss and every failed project somehow deemed successful. So simple in its essence, the theory makes you wonder how nobody pointed it out sooner (Gale Academic OneFile, 2009).

Cohen (2009), President of the Institute of Leader Arts and a retired Major General from the USAF Reserve, feels that one can rise above failure even if the person is let go from that job. Cohen (2009, p. 19) goes on to state that: "incompetence should not be tolerated. But before dismissal, ask: Is failure [really] due to incompetence? There are other reasons, even inexperience."

On the 40th anniversary of the Peter Principle, Sutton (2009) wrote that the world is ready for the reappearance of a book on incompetence. Even though we cannot give incompetence all the credit for what was gone wrong with the economy. It is clear that the CEOs at financial firms had no idea what they were doing. Everyone is always at his or her level of incompetence because the system is so poorly constructed.

Pluchino et al. (2010, p. 412) used game theory to demonstrate that if one takes the Peter Principle as given, then performance after promotion is independent of performance in the previous job. In this

case, the optimal strategy for organizations is to promote the worst candidate. On the other, if performance at the new job is related to performance in the old job, then a common-sense strategy of promoting the best candidate leads to increased organizational effectiveness.

In 2011, Terry et al., in an article called: *Changing the "Peter Principled" culture of health care systems*, stated detailed indicators of a Peter Principled culture that include the following:

- a. Seniority trumps competence — all of us live too much in a circle.
- b. Leaders in these organizations are promoted based mostly on seniority, and achieving that leadership role almost guarantees life-long academic-like tenure. In general, who you know matters more than what you know.
- c. Senior employees who simply waited for a long enough time are promoted without being compared to qualified candidates who come from outside the organization. Yet, they may not be the most competent or qualified candidates (2).

In a study by Dickinson and Villeval (2012), these researchers found that when the Peter Principle is not too severe, promotion rules often dominate self-selection competence of tasks assignment. Results are consistent with imperfect appraisal of transitory ability and a lack of strategic behavior.

Organizations continually face the problem of how to match individuals with the job in which they are most productive and to provide them with incentives. Koch and Nafziger (2012) showed that inefficient job assignments arise in organizations even if there is full information about different employees. They stated: "Although promotions are desirable for most employees, they make the least able in a hierarchy level worse off: for them earnings increase only because they work harder to compensate for their incompetence" (p. 1029). In their concluding remarks, they stated the following about their research:

... offers an explanation as to why organizations seem to be content with having employees in positions where they are less productive than they would be in their former job (the Peter Principle). Second, it shows that employees moving up the career ladder may earn more only because they have to work harder than they would in their old jobs for the same pay. Third, the setup captures the idea that a promotion can be a good thing for most workers, but at the same time reduce the rents enjoyed by the least able workers in a hierarchy level (pp. 1049-1050).

Murray and Fortinberry (2013) stated: Whatever industry it is in, the success of a business lies to a very great extent in the quality of its people leadership. In my observation, the top leaders of many of even the largest organizations do not feel that they need further training—that is for the lower ranks. They feel that the fact that they have reached the top is proof enough of their leadership skills. However, the famous quip derived from the Peter Principle, "a person rises to his or her level of incompetence," holds true for senior management as well as for other ranks (Peter and Hull, 1969) (p. 41).

Carey and Useem (2014), in their latest article — *How Microsoft Avoided the Peter Principle with Nadella*— stated that:

The vital—though not-soon-to-be answered—question is whether Mr. Nadella brings the right leadership talents not only to run the show but also to grow the enterprise at the center of one of the most turbulent and competitive frays on earth. And that question is likely to be answered in the affirmative if the directors have managed to avoid the Peter Principle (i.e., . . . companies, having promoted executives to what they were really good at, elevate them one time too many. Great at mid-level, the managers were not game-ready for the next level) (p. 2).

Romaine (2014, p. 410), in another research study on the Peter Principle, examined the evidence for problems with merit-based promotions, as well as various explanations that have been advanced for why

these problems occur. Interestingly enough, Romaine proposed a new model, based on contemporary management theory and evidence, which addresses the question for why promotions fail.

Ovans (2014, p. 3), in the same year, stated that “incompetence is rife.” The heart of this argument is this: In dealing with superiors, subordinates must navigate through a minefield of potential disasters.

In an article called *the Reverse Peter Principle at Work*, Muehrcke (2016, p. 2) affirmed that the Peter Principle is as discouraging, frustrating, and demoralizing as it is common. This author went on to state that there was a remedy for this familiar problem: Apply the Reverse Peter Principle. In other words, be a doer as well as a leader.

In a fascinating article about leadership failure, Dobni et al. (2016, pp. 13-14), recognized that:

Steve Jobs was known for contextualizing many words like *insane*, *awesome*, *magical* and *cool*, but there was one word that he reviled, and that was “bozo”. Bozo was a term Jobs used to describe someone who just did not get it. A bozo to him was someone who was more interested in bureaucracy than innovation, someone who was ineffective and lacked authenticity, someone who focused on what was not important. Isaacson, in his Jobs biography (2011), says Jobs' biggest fear for Apple was something he referred to as a *bozo revolution*: hiring a bozo, who then hires another bozo until there is an entire division of bozos, or, even worse, an entire organization run by them.

Like the bozo fear, the Peter Principle also captures fear of failure in management. A concept in management theory formulated by Laurence J. Peter, it contends that the selection of a candidate for a position is based on the candidate's performance in his current role rather than on abilities needed for the intended role. Thus, managers rise to the level of their incompetence (Peter and Hull, 1969).

Johnson (2016, p. 28), in his article called: *The Road More Traveled by the Dotis*, specified that:

As an entrepreneur, I learned that we are all different - not good or bad different - just different. Our skill set is to dream, create, plan and strategize how to build new businesses and make profits. Many of us screw it up by trying to manage our creation by also operating the business (definitely not one of our better skill sets), so then we search for talented operations executives to help us manage our business. Then we frequently discover that hiring and identifying talented executives is not one of our stronger skill sets either. So then what we end up seeing are many initially successful businesses slowly fail as their creators reach the limits of their management abilities (the essence of the Peter Principle). Then there are the excellent operating executives that can and do manage mature and successful businesses well. They are invaluable and are the life blood that keeps an organization humming if it's successful. Both of these types and styles have to effectively mesh with a Board of Directors or Trustees - just another tactical challenge in the strategic quest for long-term success.

Chan (2018), in a recent study, found that when workers relative performance information (RPI) is lower after promotion because the promoted worker lacks the ability to perform the new job well. This is consistent with the concept of the Peter Principle.

In a more current article in the Harvard Business Review (2018), titled *The Best Performers aren't the Best Bosses*, the HBR editors concluded that, even though the Peter Principle is an accepted adage, the Peter Principle was never empirically tested on a large scale—until a recent study examined whether firms really do pass over their best potential managers in favor of employees with superior technical skills. The researchers found that leaders should evaluate the costs of moving their best individual contributors into management positions and consider rewarding top performers with pay rather than promotions. They might also contemplate the use of dual career tracks—one for people with outstanding technical skills, the other for those with strong leadership potential (p. 28).

ANALYSIS

To more carefully conduct an analytic exploration of the literature, I narrowed the search from a total of 139 critiques to 16 pieces in the Literature Review section. Of those articles, Table 1 summarizes the key themes I found about the Peter Principle. In essence, this body of research confirms that the Peter Principle is still prevalent in business.

Table 1: Key Themes about the Peter Principle

2009	RIMS	The Peter Principle is profound. It explains every bureaucracy that gets nothing done, every painfully ignorant boss, and every failed project somehow deemed successful.
2009	Cohen	One can rise above failure even if the person is let go from that job. He also states that: “incompetence should not be tolerated. But before dismissal, ask: Is failure due to incompetence? There are other reasons, even inexperience.”
2009	Sutton	We cannot give incompetence all the credit for what is gone wrong with the economy. It is clear that the CEOs at financial firms had no idea what they were leading. Everyone is always at his or her level of incompetence because they system is so bad.
2010	Pluchino et al.	Stated that if performance at the new job is related to performance in the old job, then a common-sense strategy of promoting the best candidate leads to increased organizational effectiveness.
2011	Terry et al.	Seniority trumps competence. Leaders in these organizations are promoted based mostly on seniority and achieving that leadership role almost guarantees life-long academic-like tenure. Senior employees who simply waited for a long enough time are promoted without being compared to qualified candidates who come from outside the organization. Yet, they may not be the most competent or qualified candidates.
2012	Dickinson & Villeval	Found that when the Peter Principle is not too severe, promotion rules often dominate self-selection competence of tasks assignment. Results are consistent with imperfect appraisal of transitory ability and a lack of strategic behavior.
2012	Koch & Nafziger	Inefficient job assignments arise in organizations even if there is full information about employees’ types. Although promotions are desirable for most employees, they make the least able in a hierarchy level worse off: for them earnings increase only because they work harder to compensate for their incompetence.
2013	Murray & Fortinberry	Top leaders of the largest organizations do not feel that they need further training—that is for the lower ranks. They feel that the fact that they have reached the top is proof enough of their leadership skills.
2014	Carey & Useem	The vital—though not-soon-to-be answered—question is whether Mr. Nadella brings the right leadership talents not only to run the show but also to grow the enterprise at the center of one of the most turbulent and competitive frays on earth. And that question is likely to be answered in the affirmative if the directors have managed to avoid the Peter Principle (i.e., . . . companies, having promoted executives to what they were really good at, elevate them one time too many. Great at mid-level, the managers were not game-ready for the next level).
2014	Romaine	Proposed a new model, based on contemporary management theory and evidence, which addresses the question for why promotions fail.
2014	Ovans	Incompetence is rife.
2016	Muehrcke	The Peter Principle is as discouraging, frustrating, and demoralizing as it is common.
2016	Dobni et al.	Jobs' biggest fear for Apple was something he referred to as a <i>bozo revolution</i> : hiring a bozo, who then hires another bozo until there is an entire division of bozos, or, even worse, an entire organization run by them.
2016	Johnson	Initially successful businesses slowly fail as their creators reach the limits of their management abilities (the essence of the Peter Principle).
2018	Chan	Found that when workers RPI is lower after promotion because the promoted worker lacks the ability to perform the new job well.
2018	HBR editors	The Peter Principle was never empirically tested on a large scale—until a recent study examined whether firms really do pass over their best potential managers in favor of employees with superior technical skills.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

What are the implications of our findings that was published back in 2009? First, we accepted as true that the Peter Principle (1969) was still thriving—it is not in decline. It is doing well at least in the general business/management world. Second, our research showed that 74% of the people believe that it is faring well and 73% of these same participants alluded to the fact that they have seen this situation happen within the last five years.

Gay, Salaman, and Rees (1996) cited the conclusion by Hill (1991, p. 398) that while contemporary discourses of organizational reform allocate a crucial role to managers, the analysis of the so-called “new managerial work” by social scientists in general and sociologists in particular has tended to be cursory and not illuminating. In large part, this neglect is an effect of the labor process framework within which discussions of flexibility and organizational restructuring have been conducted. Hill’s (1991) primary concern with labor has meant that the nature of managerial organization has received little serious attention. As researchers, we note that the relevance of our study shows that organizations have not spent adequate time training their employees to make them more competent, especially as they move up the organizational ladder.

Winterton and Winterton (1997, p. S74) learned in their own case-study research study about “management development” (i.e., training managers to be more effective) that management development is more likely to improve performance when it is linked with organizational strategy. Once again, we believe this is, therefore, a training issue.

Lewis (1999) suggested that: “Before you promote an employee to the next level, ask yourself these questions before making a decision. Is the employee:

- Performing present duties well enough to justify a promotion?
- Experienced and qualified to do at least part of the new job?
- Willing to hand over current responsibilities to a new person?
- Enthusiastic about taking on a new role?
- Familiar with the new position’s responsibilities and priorities?
- Proficient in the interpersonal skills necessary to work with others in a new role?
- Adequately trained, or willing to be?
- Prepared to bow out gracefully if the promotion doesn’t work out as planned?” (p. 13)

McKenna (2004) stated that managerial competencies and skills cannot be developed in seclusion from the context in which they will be applied and that the management skills developed, over time, are not necessarily the skills needed for managerial success. And we deem this is, once again, a lack of corporate training.

In revisiting the universal phenomenon of the Peter Principle and further reviewing the significance of our investigation, it is clear that not much has changed over the past fifty years. The fact that co-workers observe deserving as well as undeserving people being elevated to positions of management and responsibility, and who so frequently become incompetent, begs a slew of questions: Why does this happen? Is it the selection process? How important is training—prior to and continuing after a promotion—as part of being elevated?

One way to overcome the marvel of the Peter Principle, at least in part, is that organizations should refrain from promoting a worker until that person shows the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities along with the appropriate work habits needed to succeed to the next higher job. According to Ulich (2007), the best talent comes down to three essential qualities: competence, commitment, and

contribution; and organizations must strive to cultivate all of these elements in their employees. The importance of Peter's observations does not necessarily imply discovery, but rather a condition and a so-called emotional appeal that has existed since the beginning of society. We further believe that all organizations need people of quality and that without quality leadership, organizations rarely survive in any case. History is our teacher about what leadership means to the success or failure of any endeavor. If this is true, why is it so difficult to find people who continue to grow and do an "efficient" job throughout their long-term work life?

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study's results must be interpreted with certain caveats in mind. And while I feel the information presented is certainly persuasive, and, at times, convincing, I did not conduct an independent research study. This paper is only intended to be an observational assessment of 139 different articles or reports, and one peer reviewed article, of my own previous work, on the discipline of the Peter Principle. That said, I decided to pursue an evocative investigation so that the reader could better understand the current status of the Peter Principle.

Even though much more work still needs to be pursued in this incompetence trend, I hope to pursue, as a former combat warrior in the United States Marine Corps, another more exhaustive Peter Principle study within all the branches of the United States Armed Forces.

These caveats notwithstanding, the outcome of this report has both theoretical and practical implications. Further, in future studies of the Peter Principle, I feel it is worthwhile to use correlation, factor, or even regression analyses to determine differences or relationships between questions.

I believe that organizations reflect the attitudes, values, and behaviors of those that shape them (Rosener, 1990), especially as people are promoted within the organization. Further, an organizational culture that fosters the proper training, especially as employees are promoted, and supports the implementation of the differing leadership/management styles may benefit from synergistic effects.

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