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Sometimes it's the Peter Principle at work

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Whatever our chosen profession, we try to do the best we can. Still, sometimes things still don't work out the way we planned. But that doesn't mean you've reached your level of incompetence. In 1969 Dr. Laurence Peter wrote a best-selling book describing how people keep getting promoted until they reach their "position of incompetence" - The Peter Principle. The theory is that "the selection of a candidate for a position is usually based on their performance in their current role rather than on the abilities they may possess relevant to the intended new role.

If you have ever looked at your boss and wondered "Who promoted him?" or learned of someone's promotion and wondered "How did that happen?" - it may be The Peter Principle in action. Of course, whenever you've been promoted to a new position, you were able to rise to the occasion - and succeeded, right?

Your columnist - a marketing and PR pro - was reflecting on whether he had ever found himself doubting his abilities, coming face-to-face with The Peter Principle:

An independent school client hosted a fancy fundraiser featuring as guest speaker Dr. Henry Kissinger, former secretary of state and Nobel Peace Prize recipient. I was handling the PR and had to make sure large donors got their photo taken with Dr. Kissinger as a memento. The reception was in a dimly-lit room, and the photographer was using a flash. Around the 15th photo, Kissinger shook his fist at me (directing the photographer) and shouted with his thick German accent, "Tell him to stop flashing in my face." I nodded and asked the photographer to take natural-light photos. They came out fine. But should I have had a plan B - a second photo-taking room?

A real estate firm needed a new "For Lease" banner on their building. I coordinated installation so nearby parking spaces were roped off for the installer. The next day, the sign company owner called, upset. All went according to plan - but coincidentally, the banner location was just outside the regional OSHA office. The installer hadn't used his safety strap and helmet, nor had he chocked the wheels, and a few other infractions. I think the fine was double the cost to fabricate and install the banner. Could I have anticipated that outcome?

Nobody can predict such unexpected surprises, no matter what type work they do or how long they've been doing it. One lesson is that if something doesn't go exactly as planned, it may not be your fault. But one of the best ways to insure you will be successful in your work: Decide what you do best (better than anyone else) and insert that brilliance into everything you do. And next time you need some brilliant PR/marketing, talk to me.

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