

Occupational Evolution Without Practitioners

Barrington D. Walker

California State University, Northridge

Fall 2014

Introduction

In general management theory, the choosing of a nominee for a job based on their current and typically exceptional performance within a given occupation rather than on qualifications for an intended position is referred to as “The Peter Principle” (Peter and Hull, 1969). If an incumbent is incapable of performing at the anticipated level of the intended position, they no longer perform effectively and as a consequence get promoted to a level they are no longer competent to perform (Peter and Hull, 1969). Individuals being sought out for promotion based on their expertise are susceptible to misinterpreting the promotion into management without fully understanding the role, especially if they come from a job where their responsibilities were narrowly focused. Being placed in a position where the expectations are less task oriented and more about budgets, strategic planning, internal and external analytical relationships is an endeavor that even experienced managers are challenged with. Although the incumbents philosophical approach in being able to successfully transition into management is predicated on their prior professional success, they may still be too inexperienced in their career for promotion (Ashkenas, R. 2010).

Context

I am an Information Technology Consultant for California State University, Northridge (CSUN) which is a college campus located in the community of Northridge CA in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles county. It is one of the 23 statewide campuses that comprises the California State University system. CSUN sits atop 356 acres, and has over 91 permanent structures, of which 25 are buildings that function as academic space for lectures and laboratories (CSUN facilities information, 2014). All other structures are dormitories, faculty offices, centers, eateries, facilities, parking structures and athletic fields. Resources within each of these spaces

provide technologies such as desktop and mobile computing, hard-wired and wireless internet access, multi-media capability and telephony services. Support for the aforementioned technologies is the responsibility of CSUN's central Information Technology (IT) organization, which is made up of various administrators, consultants, analysts, programmers, technicians and student assistants. As a senior level Information Technology Consultant for Telecommunication Services, I provide expert level technical and customer support to individuals in varying internal and external domains, each of whom have diverse levels of familiarity with technology, yet being vital components for being able to get a single job done (Wenger, 1998). The core of my duties is to provide consultation to the constituents of CSUN as it relates to data and telecommunications technology, i.e. wired and wireless internet connectivity, voice over IP and analog telephony, indoor structured cabling including outside plant of the campus' underground communications infrastructure. Additionally, I manage the daily activities of journeymen within my specific professional domain, along with apprentice level student assistants. This position of middle management requires simultaneously giving directions to subordinates while rendering given directives from superiors.

Statement of need

Evolution into this position of leadership is a process that happened over time, without guidance from practitioners near or circumferential to my current job classification. My inquiry focuses on the drawbacks of what I am calling *occupational evolution without practitioners*; career advancement without adequate guidance or checks and balances from domain related experts. I was offered a managerial position based on my exceptional performance and aptitude. Selection was due in part to the fact that I had received several promotions in a less than average

amount of time, from entry-level computer repair technician to mid-level network analyst. I was generally self taught, eager, motivated, energetic, absorbed information rapidly, and I revealed tendencies often found in natural leaders. From the perspective of those recommending me for management, I was an ideal candidate. Yet irrespective of my aptitudes, I was still devoid of many of the core qualifications required for a typical person in a role of management. If I would have had to go through the typical recruitment process, I more than likely would not have been considered (Ashkenas, R. 2010).

For the next few years I struggled tremendously trying to adjust and figure out how to be a manager. There simply was no process to prepare me for the nuances that came with the position. I had no understanding of budgets, reading or preparing a gantt charts, developing policy documents, being a project manager or dealing with human resource issues. Learning an abstract profession such as management was entirely different than what I was accustomed to when I was dealing strictly with technology as a technician or analyst. I am in management today but invariably, my job became an extemporaneous assimilation through adaptation, as opposed to a more formalized process of learning through a community of practice. Arriving at this realization of duties is a retrospective viewpoint that was gained through learning social learning theory.

Proposed Solution

Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) is a term by which the methodology of apprenticeship and practitioner are examined as a way of gaining an analytical perspective into learning. It is a process of explanation by which inexperience and expertise is defined by encompassing characteristics such as social setting, cognitive presence and teaching structures.

An apprentice is *taught* by an expert but *learns* by doing, often times repeatedly (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Using LPP as a frame of reference, I would submit a proposal to develop a policy whereby all workplace promotions are reviewed by a human resource expert who is trained to identify individuals in situations where consideration for professional advancement is done based on an incumbents aptitude and potential as opposed to qualifying them on a basis of their experience. Mandatory participant involvement would be evaluated by a ranking system or domain expert before the apprentice is worthy of advancement to the next level, or stage.

This technique of learning by doing teaches the participant how to develop the tools that are necessary in order to become proficient within a given domain (Barab and Duffy, 1998). If an incumbent demonstrates qualifications that are commensurate to the position being filled, then they would be assessed under the same guidelines as someone who would apply procedurally from outside of the domain. If, however, they do not possess the necessary qualifications within the classification being considered, but do possess a developable potential to hold a position of higher classification, then it will be up to the human resource specialist to institute an occupationally specific, time-sensitive training program that is proctored by field related experts who are situated both internal and external to the domain (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The incumbent would be mentored by the experts and evaluated throughout the process as they learn to piece together their own methods of inquiry and resolve (Barab and Duffy, 1998). Thus, the program would be structured similarly to how a medical student serves time as an intern (apprentice) in a residency (community of practice) as a stage of medical training (learning by doing) while mentored by the resident physician (expert). The overarching intent is to provide a

reliable foundation for which the employee can build upon that extends beyond the occupational skillset from which they were initially considered.

Evaluation

Evaluation would be assessed in the developmental stages of the trainees program by an expert level technologist who has is internally vested interest within the department, much like an advisor mentors Phd. candidates specific to a discipline. The incumbent would need to demonstrate proficiency against a predetermined rubric and have a final interview with a specifically qualified human resource specialist who is trained to recognise individuals who have gone from task oriented to abstract careers.

Conclusion

Absence of thoughtful preparation and consideration of qualification places an incumbent and organization at risk when skillsets outside of an employee's area of expertise are called upon within an expected job classification. Those who are exceptional in one job may not automatically be skilled at management (Lazear, 2004). The employee may do well initially, while still performing their old duties, but may find it difficult or even fail when they realize they do not possess management skills, thus, substantiating the The Peter Principle argument. The organization suffers as they have to deal with a poorly performing manager, and is also confronted with how that specific divisions knowledge deficiency affects the company at large. A basic concept of social learning theory conveys that learning is best achieved when it occurs contextually within the same domain of a given social and physical setting (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Provisioning a suitable structure that corresponds similarly to the cognitive apprenticeship framework of Barab and Duffy's "From Practice Fields to Communities of Practice" (2000), along with the methodologies of social learning theory where learning is situational within a

community of practice with apprentices and practitioners, candidates without managerial experience will be better situated within their adjusted community of practice.

References

- Ashkenas, R. (2010, June 8). Are You the Victim of an Invisible Promotion? Harvard Business Review. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2010/06/are-you-the-victim-of-an-invis>
- Barab, S. A., & Duffy, T. (2000). From practice fields to communities of practice. *Theoretical foundations of learning environments*, 1(1), 25-55.
- Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L., & Cocking, R. R. (2000). How people learn.
- Brown, J. S., Collins, A., & Duguid, P. (1989). Situated cognition and the culture of learning. *Educational researcher*, 18(1), 32-42.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation. Cambridge university press.
- Lazear, E. P. (2004). The Peter Principle: A theory of decline. *Journal of Political Economy*, 112(S1), S141-S163.
- Office of Institutional Research. (2014). Facilities Planning Information. Retrieved from <http://www.csun.edu/institutional-research/facilities-information>
- Peter, L. J., & Hull, R. (1969). The Peter Principle: Why Things Always Go Wrong. William Morrow & Co. Inc, New York.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge university press.