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Post Turtle and Promotions

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Recently, I came across a image of Post Turtle and a explanation of what it is as narrated by an old farmer to a doctor tending to his injury.

What is a Post Turtle?

1. He did not get up there by himself.
2. He does not belong up there.
3. He does not know what to do while he is up there.

He is elevated beyond his ability to function and people wonder what kind of dumb idiot put him up there to begin with!

It is funny, accurate and happens in many organizations (small and big). I am able to relate this to many promotion situations I have witnessed myself in many organizations that I

worked. Wrong promotions of incapable persons to the wrong positions.

What are the implications of placing a wrong person in a position?

Peter Principle (Canadian researcher Dr. Laurence J. Peter) states that employees in an hierarchy, are promoted until they reach a level of respective incompetence. **The principle is real and costly**. This happens in many organizations and many fields. The best performer in one level is promoted to the next level. The best player in a sport is promoted to the next level in the sports. The best worker is not always the best candidate for the manager. The employee has performed to the fullest capacity at their current role and a wrong assumption is made that he or she will have the capability to perform at the full capacity that the next level requires. You are essentially creating post turtles.

Implications of the wrong promotions.

Employee Turnover:

It might sound counter-intuitive – but, it is bad for the employee who may not have capability to perform at the next level. The employee is setup for failure in the new role. He will become depressed when he is not able to perform as he was doing it in the previous level. He may feel that he is not getting the support from his management, or his team. He may eventually leave. Others who felt he was promoted wrongly may lose interest in performing their role to their full capacity and leave as well.

Productivity:

It decreases productivity. The people reporting to him become unhappy and the morale is destroyed. They may leave eventually. Employees who feel that they are more deserved than the one who got promoted feel negative and their performance dips. In Sales fields, promoting the best sales person reduces the future sales numbers. He is now spending time in managing reports and scheduling time for others. Productivity of the entire team is messed up.

Cultural perception:

If the wrong promotions happen frequently, then a negative perception of the organization culture is formed which results in an overall impact to the organizational performance as well in achieving the vision.

Why does it happen?

It starts with the wrong perception of the manager that the employee is ready and fit for the next level. In some cases, it is the result of some form of favouritism. In other cases, the managers themselves do not have a bigger understanding of the next level role and are clouded by the better performance.

What needs to be done?

I knew a person from one of my client side who was an excellent COBOL programmer all through his career. He never wanted to be a manager. He hated managing others. He was happy managing himself and his programs. A great sales person may not be a great sales manager. Managing involves more than managing sales. It involves managing people, their aspirations, their worries, their performance, their motivation. He may not be interested or skilled at taking on the other responsibilities of the manager role.

Assess for the skills needed at the next level.

Identify the skills that are needed for the next level and assess the employee for the fitment of the skills. Make the promotion decision only if he has the skills needed for the next level.

The following couplets by the Tamil poet Thiruvallvar summarize this step perfectly .

இதனை இதனால் இவன்முடிக்கும் என்றாய்ந்து
அதனை அவன்கண் விடல்.

After having considered, "this man can accomplish this, by these means", let (the king) leave with him the discharge of that duty

வினைக்குரிமை நாடிய பின்றை அவனை
அதற்குரிய னாகச் செயல்.

Having considered what work a man is fit for, let (the king) employ him in that work.

How true!

Train for the next level.

If the fitment is not there, before promoting or just after promoting, the employee needs training to develop capacity to perform in the next level. Training programs like 'First-time Managers' will help.

Career Progression Paths

Define a career progression path for each type of role. I know some organizations are already doing this. A clear growth path for an employee will help him as well as the organization.

Understand the needs of the employee.

It would be better to promote the one who most wants the job would be a better option than just promoting the star performer. Some people who wants the position. The perks that come along with the position. Some people are tired of the pressure of the current position and want an escape route. Understand what the employee plan to do in the next level. What his needs are. Then, take a call.

Reward and Recognition

Employees give their best with an intrinsic motivation for rewards. The performance has to be recognized and rewarded. So, what needs to be done here? Recognize and reward the performance with incentives. But, promote the performer only if he is capable and willing to perform in the next level.

HR Policies

Create a organization-level policies to implement the Promote-to-capability rule. The promotion needs to be done not just based on the past performance, but, future potential.

Ultimately, we need to promote someone who has the most interest in the new role, who has understood the responsibilities of the new role, and most importantly who has the capability to perform to the full capacity of the new role.

Those who are interested can read the research report by Alan Benson, Danielle Li and

Kelly Shue : [Promotions and the Peter Principle.](#)

Have you seen any Post Turtles in your organization ? Please share your thoughts in the comments section below. Learning never stops.

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Anbarasu Thangavelu, PhD

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Wrote a new article about the wrong promotions in organizations and the creation of post turtles.

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Manoj kumar Shanmuganathan · 1st
Manager at EY FSO Consulting

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[Dr. Anbarasu Thangavelu](#) excellent writing, very well articulated. Thirukural references and favoritism being the culprit was spot on.

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1y ...

Thank you, [Manoj kumar Shanmuganathan](#).

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Umashanker S · 1st
Process Control and MES Applications

1y ...

Dr. Anbu, Nice write up and to the point. Have a different perspective though when I saw the turtle on the pole. Yesterday, being a full moon I was basking at a backwater spot near Muscat when I observed the water lifting up due to high tide. Something stuck in me as I recalled your write up "Post Turtle and Promotions" and the turtle stuck on the pole. I felt people reach positions like this turttle on the pole and feel safe there until the tide which is the hard working subordinates around. As the tide re ...see more

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Wonderful perspective, **Umashanker S.** This is again a situation where the turtle cannot perform effectively and do not know what to do as the it cannot shore up any resources.

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