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FOREWORD

Dr. Peter’s Useful and Hilarious Classic

by Robert I. Sutton

The Peter Principle came as a revelation to my father, Lewis Sutton. He ran a little company in San Francisco called Oceanic Marine that sold furniture and related equipment, which he installed on United States Navy ships. His livelihood depended on U.S. government bureaucrats and shipyard managers, who often made him miserable. I grew up listening to his tirades about how these “overpaid idiots” insisted that he produce and procure poorly designed furnishings, how they could barely do their jobs, and how pathetically lazy they were. To make matters worse, senior government officials produced an onslaught of absurd procedures that required him to jump through an ever-expanding maze of administrative hoops—which wasted his time, drove up his costs, and made him crazy. He concluded: “The morons at the top must
be paid to waste as much taxpayer money as possible.”

My father loved *The Peter Principle* because it explained why life could be so maddening—and why everyone around you seems, or is doomed to become, incompetent. The people who ran the U.S. Navy and the shipyards didn’t intend to do such lousy work. They were simply victims of Dr. Peter’s immutable principle. They had been promoted inevitably, maddeningly, absurdly to their “level of incompetence.” Dr. Peter also taught my father not to expect the few competent bureaucrats and managers he encountered to stick around for long, as they would soon be promoted to a job that they were unable to perform properly. Dr. Peter even showed that such incompetence had pervaded my dad’s business for hundreds of years. The book quotes a report from 1684 about the British Navy: “The naval administration was a prodigy of wastefulness, corruption, ignorance, and indolence . . . no estimate could be trusted . . . no contract was performed . . . no check was enforced.”

My dad took special delight in the pseudoscientific jargon that Dr. Peter invented to describe the weird and wasteful behaviors displayed by those languishing at their level of incompetence. Peter gave absurd and comedic names to the tragic realities of working life. The root of the entire book, the condition of incompetence that Peter called “Final Placement Syndrome,” leads some to develop “Abnormal Tabulology” (an “unusual and highly significant arrangement of his desk”). This pathology is manifested, for example, in “Tabulatory Gigantism” (an obsession with having a bigger desk than his colleagues). My father’s business was especially afflicted with
the “Teeter-Totter Syndrome” (“a complete inability to make decisions”) and “Cachinatory Inertia” (“the habit of telling jokes instead of getting on with business”). As with so many others who were buoyed by this international bestseller, Dr. Peter’s sense of the absurd helped my father combat this tragedy of ineptitude by responding with laughter rather than rage.

I have a soft spot for *The Peter Principle* because my dad loved it so much. Before revisiting it to write this foreword, I hadn’t read it since it was first published in 1969 (when I was fifteen). I expected it would be a quaint curiosity, that Dr. Peter’s old book would be largely irrelevant to today’s workplace. I presumed that the application of business knowledge developed over the last forty years would have stamped out many maladies described by Dr. Peter, that market forces would have eliminated many or most organizations that were riddled with incompetence, and that subsequent writings on the subject would be more useful and engaging than *The Peter Principle*. I was wrong on all three counts. Yes, the book is archaic in some ways, especially in its use of sexist language and examples. Yet the book’s main ideas remain as pertinent to running and working in an organization today as they were forty years ago. None of this would have surprised Dr. Peter, who depicted his ideas as timeless and immutable facts of organizational life. “Incompetence,” he argued, “knows no barrier of time or place.” Dr. Peter observed that one reason so many employees are incompetent is that the skills required to get a job often have nothing to do with what is required to do the job itself. The skills required to run a great political campaign have little to do with the skills required to govern.
There is nothing about being a great surgeon that prepares a doctor to run a hospital. Learning to be a great litigator in no way prepares a lawyer to run a law firm. Many organizations, from hospitals to law firms, use such standards to select new leaders—yet devote little or no attention to their management skills. They often end up with lousy leaders and lose their best individual performers. These observations remain just as true in 2019 as they did in 1969.

Or consider Dr. Peter’s counterintuitive claim that “in most hierarchies, super-competence is more objectionable than incompetence.” He warned that extremely skilled and productive employees often face criticism, and are fired if they don’t start performing worse. Their presence “disrupts and therefore violates the first commandment of hierarchical life: the hierarchy must be preserved.” Unfortunately, this pattern persists in many modern organizations. Several fantastic teachers that I know at prestigious universities have been pressured by peers and leaders to do a worse job of teaching because “you are making everyone else look bad.” One of these professors insists that he received tenure partly because he worked to earn teaching evaluations that were no better than those of the professors who evaluated his case. Even the youngest super-competent people in our society still face criticism and ostracism—like nine-year-old Jericho Scott, a star little league baseball pitcher in New Haven, Connecticut. Jericho had never hurt an opposing player with his well-controlled, 40-mile-per-hour fastball. But when his coach refused to stop Jericho from pitching, the league hierarchy responded by barring Jericho from pitching and disbanding his undefeated team. Jericho’s
coach complained—to no avail—that his young star was punished for being too good. As for Jericho, he told the Associated Press that “I feel sad,” and that “I feel like it’s all my fault nobody could play.” If Jericho wants to play in this league, I guess his choices are to play another position (like second base) where he isn’t super-competent or to figure out how to become a mediocre pitcher.

Another reason *The Peter Principle* has no peer is that it somehow manages to be devilishly silly yet accurate and useful all at the same time. It reads like a first-rate parody of a business book—it reminds me of the best stuff in *Daily Mash* or the *Onion*. Satire works when it exposes the truth and upends fallacy. *The Peter Principle* is so funny because it is so true. It is filled with practical ideas that we can all use to limit the damage that incompetence does to our organizations and ourselves.

One reason the book is so hilarious is that Dr. Peter was not only an incisive thinker but masterfully creative with words. If Dr. Seuss and Peter Drucker had joined forces to write a business book, *The Peter Principle* might have been the result. Peter invented dozens of strange, stilted, and pseudoscientific phrases and words. I suggest reading the glossary of over 100 phrases and words from “the science of hierarchiology” in the back before turning to the rest of the book. The translations will help you absorb Dr. Peter’s ideas more quickly and more deeply. Plus, the silly pseudoscientific jargon (paired with well-crafted definitions) will get you into the right mindset for entering Dr. Peter’s strange and wonderful world. Words he invented, such as *hierarchiology*, *structurophillia*, and *static*—
manship, weren’t in any dictionary in 1969, and don’t seem to have entered the English language some fifty years later. And I can’t find any behavioral science research on terms such as “Percussive Sublimation” (“being kicked upstairs: a pseudo promotion”) and “Peter’s Circumambulation” (“a detour around a super-incumbent,” who is “a person above you who, having reached his level of incompetence, blocks your path to promotion”). All these words sound just like the jargon used in well-developed scientific fields. Yet, unlike experts who unintentionally develop absurd and often incomprehensible jargon, Dr. Peter meant to be silly when he invented the language for a field that did not (and still does not) exist.

The silliness persists with the names invented for case studies of employees and organizations. People such as J. S. Minion, G. Spender, and Miss T. Totland, or organizations such as the Excelsior City Special Education Department, are given fake names, and it is often difficult to tell if the stories themselves are real or fictional. The boldness of Dr. Peter’s claims also somehow mocks the overconfidence that runs through most self-help and business books, while simultaneously making his arguments more convincing. He states repeatedly that “there are no exceptions to the Peter Principle.” This claim is absurd on the face of it because, as he says, “the science of hierarchiology” is based on limited evidence and requires much work to develop. Yet taking such a strong position enabled Dr. Peter to present his ideas in efficient and persuasive ways. I laughed a lot through Chapter III, which argues that all apparent exceptions to the Peter Principle are not exceptions at all. In rapid-fire fashion, he shows that Percussive Sublimation,
the Paternal Instep (promoting a family member several steps above his or her level of incompetence), and a host of other apparent exceptions to the principle, in fact, demonstrate the power of the principle. By the end of the chapter, I suspect that many of the most cynical and logical readers will be convinced by his arguments.

That is the wonderful thing about The Peter Principle. It doesn’t seem to matter that the jargon, names, and stories are fake. It doesn’t seem to matter that many of the assertions are twisted and, at times, seemingly wildly illogical. Somehow, despite (or perhaps because) of all this nonsense, a host of accurate and useful ideas emerge from this masterpiece. The validity of these ideas isn’t just supported by Dr. Peter’s rhetorical flourish and keen eye. Many of Dr. Peter’s ideas are also supported by modern behavioral science research.

Stanford Professor and renowned economist Edward P. Lazear published an academic paper in 2001 called “The Peter Principle: A Theory of Decline.” Professor Lazear provides a string of impressive and (to most of us) incomprehensible mathematical formulas to explain why “individuals perform worse after having received promotion.” He lends mathematical proof to the truths Peter revealed through close (and cynical) observation. Some of these formulas show that, even if all employees promoted to the next level were competent in their previous jobs, some percentage will be incompetent in their new jobs. Professor Lazear lifts this assertion directly from The Peter Principle. He then calculates—just as Dr. Peter proposed—that this age-old scenario occurs partly because performance standards get tougher as one moves up the hierarchy.
To give you a taste, here is just one of the many intertwined formulas Professor Lazear provides:

\[ A + E(1 \mid A + 1 A^*) A + E(2 \mid A + 1 A^*) \]

Got that? Neither do I. I have no idea what this formula means, but Lazear concludes after this fancy math: “Thus, expected ability falls for promoted individuals from period 1 to period 2.”

Not all research that supports Dr. Peter’s assertions about hierarchiology is so difficult to understand. Professor Lazear summarizes a host of other, simpler studies suggesting that people with stronger skills tend to be promoted more quickly and that people with weaker skills tend to get stuck in their current jobs after just one or two promotions—as The Peter Principle proposes. Research related to The Peter Principle confirms that many of these ideas aren’t just right; they are also useful. Dr. Peter provides advice for employees who strive to rise to their level of incompetence as quickly as possible. We all fail upward, though some of us do so sooner than others. Dr. Peter explains, for example, how an employee can use a “patron” to pull him up the hierarchy, along with details about how to motivate the patron, how to get around people who block the way, and ways that multiple patrons can join together to pull an employee up the hierarchy. Much of Dr. Peter’s advice about using “pull” echoes Jeffrey Pfeffer’s Managing with Power, the main text used in many business schools to teach MBAs how to get ahead in organizations. Pfeffer’s analysis and advice is more detailed and sophisticated, but the basic ideas are remarkably similar.
The Peter Principle also offers many promising ideas that have yet to be studied carefully. I would be curious, for instance, to see research on Dr. Peter’s assertion that ignorance is bliss. Peter contends that many employees never realize they have reached their level of incompetence, which he proposes is good for an employee because “he keeps perpetually busy, never loses his expectation of further promotion, and so remains happy and healthy.” This conclusion clashes with numerous experts who exhort employees—especially managers—to face “brutal truths” and “hard facts.” The idea behind most employee performance evaluations is that, if you give employees accurate feedback about their strengths and weaknesses, they will be motivated to eliminate the weaknesses, and thus perform better. Dr. Peter uses entirely different logic. He asserts that many employees in every organization have risen to their level of incompetence, all will do so eventually, and organizations rarely fire incompetent people. (Sounds right, doesn’t it?) Following this logic, performance evaluations given to people who have achieved “final placement” might best be used to fuel their delusions of competence—not to identify weaknesses they are incapable of repairing. I’ve never heard of a performance evaluation system designed to provoke ignorance and denial, but Dr. Peter’s logic suggests that such a system would lead to happier and healthier employees—thus reducing sick days and employee turnover.

Creative incompetence is another idea from The Peter Principle ripe for development. Peter believed that doing things badly, intentionally, and publicly was the best way for an employee to avoid final placement and, if widely applied,
the best way to build organizations filled with competent people. Dr. Peter tells a story about “P. Greene,” a competent gardener who loved his work and had no interest in promotion to foreman. Rather than taking the risk of being offered a promotion (which would be difficult to decline), “P. Greene” intentionally loses numerous receipts and packing slips, which leads to reprimands from the accounting department and causes his superiors to conclude that he has achieved final placement. The popular press occasionally writes about this theme, such as in Jared Sandberg’s 2007 Wall Street Journal piece on the virtues of “strategic incompetence.” Sandberg reports that a manager named Steve Crawley was assigned to organize an office picnic, but was eventually relieved of the job (which he didn’t want) by intentionally demonstrating deep confusion and incompetence. As Sandberg concludes, “Strategic incompetence isn’t about having a strategy that fails, but a failure that succeeds. It almost always works to deflect work one doesn’t want to do—without ever having to admit it.”

More research is needed to see if creative incompetence is a widespread and effective strategy, but my mind races ahead, regardless. Imagine university classes and management workshops where students learn how to dress in slightly unprofessional ways, or how to give poor and boring speeches (I can hear the professor advising, “mumble more” and “please, please stop looking at the audience”), and how to “forget” to attend scheduled meetings with superiors so they will conclude that you have reached your level of incompetence. If incompetence is inevitable, perhaps we should all learn to master it
on our own terms—and stop spending so much time trying to achieve competence, which is, by Peter’s definition, elusive.

As strange as Dr. Peter’s twisted take on organizational hierarchies may seem, the book’s core ideas—and many of the crazy little ideas too—are valid facts of organizational life. After reading this book a few times, I suspect I know why Dr. Peter (and coauthor Raymond Hull) decided to cloak these ideas in such a delightfully weird and perversely funny package. *The Peter Principle* clashes with piles of serious advice spewed out by an enormous industry of business educators, consultants, and gurus (this was true in 1969 and truer in 2019). Perhaps Dr. Peter realized that these unconventional and contrary ideas wouldn’t spread if they were enclosed in the usual, overly somber business book. The success and enduring relevance of this gem suggests that, regardless of Dr. Peter’s intentions, writing a serious business book disguised as a parody was a stroke of genius.
IT IS SOMETIMES difficult for the discoverer of a principle to identify accurately that moment when the revelation occurred. The Peter Principle did not enter my consciousness in a flash of recognition, but I became aware of it gradually over several years of observation of man's incompetence. It therefore seems appropriate I should present the reader with a historical account of my discovery.

A Clot for Every Slot
Although some people function competently, I observed others who had risen above their level of competence and were habitually bungling their jobs, frustrating their co-workers and eroding the efficiency of the organization. It was logical to conclude that for every job that existed in the world there was someone, somewhere, who could not do it. Given
sufficient time and enough promotions he would get that job!

I was not concerned with the oversight, the slip of the tongue, the faux pas, the occasional error which can be an embarrassment to any of us. Anyone can make a mistake. The most competent men throughout history have had their lapses. Conversely, the habitually incompetent can, by random action, be right once in a while. Instead, I was searching for the underlying principle which would explain why so many important positions were occupied by persons incompetent to fulfill the duties and responsibilities of their respective offices.

Rot at the Top
The first public presentation of the Peter Principle occurred at a seminar in September, 1960, when I addressed a group of directors of federally funded educational research projects. Because each participant had written a successful grant proposal, each had been rewarded by a promotion to a position as director of one or more research projects. Some of these men actually had research skills, but this was irrelevant to their acquiring the directorship. Many others were inept at research design and, in desperation, were simply intending to replicate some oft-repeated statistical exercise.

As I became aware of their plan to spend time and taxpayers’ money on rediscovering the wheel, I decided to explain their predicament by introducing them to the Peter Principle. Their reaction to my presentation was a mixture of hostility and laughter. A young statistician in the group convulsed with laughter and literally fell from his chair. Later he confided that
his intense reaction was caused by my humorous presentation of outrageous ideas while at the same time he was watching the district research director’s face turn red, then purple.

_Tongue in Both Cheeks_
Although case studies were accurately compiled and data realistic, I had decided to present the Peter Principle exclusively in satirical form. Therefore, in all lectures from 1960 to 1964, and in the articles that followed, examples with a humorous connotation were used and fictitious names were employed to protect the guilty.

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It was in December, 1963, during the intermission of a badly presented play that I explained to Raymond Hull why the actor playing the lead was saying his lines with his back to the audience and gesturing into the wings. This formerly competent actor had found his level of incompetence by attempting to be a combination actor-director-producer. In the conversation that ensued, Mr. Hull convinced me that I was not doing justice to the Peter Principle by presenting it to only a select few who might attend my lectures. He insisted that it should be available to the world in book form. He further suggested that without publication and copyright, someone else might attach his name to my discovery. A collaboration was agreed upon and the manuscript was completed in the spring of 1965.

_Victims of the Peter Principle_
The final manuscript was submitted to the editors of a number
of major publishing houses. The first returned it with an accompanying letter which stated: “We can see no commercial possibilities for this work and cannot encourage you to continue with it. Even with interdivisional sales the publication of this work is not warranted.” The next editor wrote: “You should not deal so lightly with such a serious topic.” Another suggested: “If you are writing a comedy, it should not contain so many tragic case studies.” Still another said: “I will reconsider publication if you will make up your mind and rewrite this as a humorous book or as a serious scientific work.” Fourteen rejection notices and two years later I began to doubt whether the world was ready for my discovery.

A Bit at a Time
It was decided that if the publishing world was not ready for a book then perhaps we might introduce the Peter Principle gradually through several short articles. Mr. Hull completed an article for Esquire magazine for December, 1966. Later I wrote about the principle for West Magazine (Los Angeles Times, April 17, 1967). The response to this article was overwhelming. Over four hundred letters were received within a few months. Requests for lectures and articles poured in and as many as possible were fulfilled.

The Selling of the Principle, 1968
In March, 1968, the President of William Morrow inquired about the possibility of a book about the Peter Principle. I dusted off the manuscript and handed it to a William Morrow editor.