



The Peter Principle – Alive and Well

By: *Peggy Hoyt, J.D., M.B.A.*



The concept behind the Peter Principle is that people get promoted until they reach a level of incompetence. This makes sense. As long as I'm doing well, learning, and performing, my efforts may be noticed and if there is an opportunity for advancement, I'll get promoted. Ultimately, I'll be promoted to a level where I've exceeded my capabilities to learn and grow - hence, the idea that I've reached the outer realm of my competency.

We've probably all seen the Peter Principle in action. These are people who are not competent to carry out the responsibilities they've been given or in some cases, responsibilities they've assumed on their own. As an entrepreneur I sometimes feel this way about myself. There are so many hats I have to wear - and wear well - that it's no surprise there will be some tasks I'm just not good at.

Fortunately, as the business owner, I have the ability to delegate the tasks I'm not good at or to outsource these tasks entirely. The problem is recognizing the things we are not good at - that are not one of our unique abilities - and to assign this task to someone who has the requisite skills.

As solo or small firm practitioners we have a tendency to wait too long to realize we aren't good at something. If we were capable of going to law school and passing the bar, then certainly we should have the ability to do the book-keeping, the filing, the purchasing of office supplies, the hiring of team members - whatever it is that may need to be done. As such, we have blinders on to our real abilities - those things that will ultimately allow our businesses to grow and succeed.

The reality is we aren't good at everything and it's foolish to believe we are and to try to do it all. When we do try to do it all, pretty soon Peter shows up. Then, we aren't doing anything well because we are trying to do too much. We are also doing things that are taking our focus off the things that really are important to our success.

What are the things you do well? Sit down and really examine what your greatest contributions are to your practice and ultimately to your success. What are the things you don't do well? What is just busy work that is eating up your productive time? How can you work smarter, not harder? What are you passionate about that gives you energy - the things you could do all day without getting bored or distracted? I ask myself these questions all the time. Sometimes the answers aren't what we really want to hear or even, to know. You may have to ask a friend or trusted team member to help you identify your unique abilities and then hold you to task to only do those things that fall within that realm.

In our practice, I have three jobs that I do well: (1) Teach or write - in other words, educate people about what we do and how we do it; (2) meet with prospective clients; and (3) meet with people who can send me more clients. I'm famous for telling my team that if I'm doing anything else, then I'm probably doing their job. That can really get people scurrying! The reality is - the other aspects of our practice are not a good use of my time. That's not to say there wasn't a day when I tried to do everything. But, and fortunately for me and for the firm, I learned early how to delegate tasks to people who did a better job and had the skills and temperament for performing them well.

I spoke last weekend at an event for lawyers. I was asked to speak on two topics I'm really passionate about - social media and marketing. Interestingly, I'm getting asked to speak on these topics more often. Rest assured, the Peter Principle is alive and well in the social media and marketing areas of the practice of law. However, this is one area where I think we can all improve. There are so many things we could do better - they aren't hard, they just require a little effort and an acknowledgement that they are important to the success of our practice. Still, it's like herding cats. We focus more on the technical and less on the marketing and business aspects of our practice. As a result, I see people who are frustrated with their success

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(or lack of it) and simply need to be doing more to fill their business pipeline.

I collected business cards from people I met at the conference. Then I checked out how many of these people are on Facebook and LinkedIn – two of the most popular social media sites. Only a few people were on one, even fewer on both. I wonder how many of these people have active web sites or blogs? Have they claimed their Avvo and JD Supra profiles? What are they doing that's working well to market their practice? What would I see and experience if I were to make a surprise visit?

If the Peter Principle is alive and well in your practice, what can you do to break through that level of incompetency? Can you get more education? Delegate more? Hire a coach? Rearrange your schedule toward more productivity? Be honest in your assessment of what you need to move to the next level of competence and success. The New Year is right around the corner, it's the perfect time to set some goals and make some lasting resolutions.

About the Author:

Peggy Hoyt, J.D., M.B.A. is an attorney and with her partner, Randy Bryan, own and operate Hoyt & Bryan, LLC—Family Wealth & Legacy Counsellors—in Oviedo, Florida. Both are Florida Bar board certified in Wills, Trusts and Estates and Elder Law. Peggy is the author of eight books including estate planning, planning for your pets, special needs planning, planning for unmarried couples and building your life and business with gratitude. Peggy is active on Facebook and LinkedIn. You can follow her blog at PeggyHoyt.com.