

When the only way is up: the pitfalls of upward mobility



For over two years, I have been working as an assistant professor at Delft University of Technology, making my way up the hierarchical, academic career ladder. I started as a PhD student at another university and, with every step up, from assistant professor to associate professor to full professor, I will get more money, more authority, more responsibility, and more management tasks. Many scholars, including myself, enjoy the prospects of future leadership roles. However, upward mobility in hierarchical structures have pitfalls.

The pitfalls

Moving to a leadership role comes with a risk of failure. Failure can be detrimental for all parties involved — the promoted employee, the people they are leading and the organisation. Failure is often linked to the level of competence of the promoted employee. Employees who were *competent* in their previous role can fail in their new one when they reach a level of incompetence because of a lack of management skills or talent ([The Peter principle](#), Peter & Hull, 1969. For a critique, see [Lazear](#), 2004). Employees who were *incompetent* in their previous role can (and most likely will!) fail in their new role because they were only promoted to a management position to prevent further damage to the workflow ([Dilbert principle](#), Adams, 1996).

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Glass cliff

Research suggests that women in particular face the risk of failure when climbing up the career ladder. That is, women are – more often than men – appointed to leadership positions that are risky and precarious. This phenomenon is called the ‘glass cliff’ ([Ryan & Haslam](#), 2005), and occurs in private and public organisations, as well as in politics (for an overview, see [Ryan et al.](#), 2015).

There are several theories on why women are placed on cliffs more often than men. These theories range from the suggestion that female leaders perform better than men in crisis situations because of specific feminine qualities like collaboration, listening, and working in the background (“think crisis, think female”), to the suggestion that the ‘old boys network’ set women up to fail because they would rather see a woman fall, and blame her for that, than a man (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, Ryan et al., 2015). Some say that British Prime Minister Theresa May has taken such a “fall girl” position. That is, she was a low-profile member in the Conservative Party holding a position that’s been called a “graveyard for political careers” and now she faces the almost impossible task of saving a country in crisis (McGregor, 2016).

Minimise the risk of failing

There is an obvious way to minimise the risks of upward mobility in hierarchical organisations. That is, to only promote those employees to leadership roles who fit the profile. In order to do that, the requirements of the position (i.e. the profile) should be set out crystal clear, as well as the skills and talents of the employee who wants to make a move. Of course, some skills can be trained, but we have to face the fact that there will always be employees who are competent and skilled, but will never become good managers. The problem is that these employees might leave the organisation if the only way is up, which could be a loss for both the employee and the organisation.

Alternative ways for job promotion

That leaves us with the question, “how to promote competent workers who lack management skills?” My answer would be: by throwing out the metaphorical career ladder. In the past, scholars have introduced the concept of a dual ladder allowing upward mobility for employees without requiring that they be placed into supervisory or managerial positions (Katz, Tushman, & Allen, 1995). But why do we need to relate promotion to moving up? The word ‘promotion’ derives from the Latin verb ‘promovere’ meaning furthering. And in my ideal world, job promotion should be about moving further, regardless of the direction. Not about upward mobility.

I realise that this is easier said than done. In our (Western) society, the more you move up in a hierarchical structure, the more you will get paid and the more people look up to you. These are important extrinsic motivations for people. And as long as we – literally – value managerial skills over other skills such as technical, social, and financial skills, it will be difficult to prevent ambitious employees from moving upwards until they reach their level of incompetence.

To make this shift towards appreciating all organisational skills equally, we need a cultural shift. Only then can we promote, award and keep aboard competent employees who do not have the will or skill to take on a leadership role. The good thing is, if we appreciate all skills equally, only the employees who have the ability, talent and (intrinsic) motivation to take on management tasks will take on the leadership roles. Which is good for the employee, the people they lead, and the organisation.

By the same author:

[If you have no intention of considering employee suggestions, then don't ask](#)



Notes:

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