



Outside the Corner Office

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Promotions and the Bucket of Ashes

Carl Sandburg once said the past is a bucket of ashes. So why do we promote based on past accomplishments? While interviewing employees and inquiring why they should be promoted to an upper-level managerial position, the typical responses justifying the promotion are (1) the number of years of service (that is, in the trenches) and (2) meeting target goals. Essentially, the promotion becomes equivalent to a reward. In the United States as well as most industrialized nations, it is considered normal (almost automatic) to promote someone because of long-term service and successes based on retrospective events. This is an easy and satisfying way to deal with employees based on an established process that often works. However, another employee inquiring about the same opportunity provided very different reasons: (1) the need for a change (that is, prevent burnout), (2) once promoted into the position, it was the employee's personal goal to do the job well for the company, and (3) the employee provided a plan as to how the company would benefit from the promotion. Granted, this employee had an excellent track record supervising top-performing projects in the past, thus fulfilling the retrospective account.

So who gets the promotion? Is the promotion a reasonable expectation after a few years of service? Common knowledge says yes. The pressure to promote as a reward for past accomplishments is stronger than ever. However, I suggest the alternative—promote prospectively than retrospectively.

One classic example of the conse-

quences associated with promoting retrospectively involved a colleague of mine. The colleague worked for a manager who was hired as a true star; promoted/appointed to a position based on retrospective successes. The manager possessed a technical degree, however, even after receiving extensive on-the-job training from the subordinates, the manager was failing miserably. My colleague had to take over the operation (almost subversively) in order for the project to succeed and work effectively. Fortunately, the manager did not need to do much, other than receive accolades for achieving project goals. Everyone knew this manager was not right for the job and was replaced. This situation was not necessarily the manager's fault. As suggested earlier, a person hired for past achievements is not always the right person for the next job. The manager, formerly a star and promoted for doing a good job somewhere else, is now looked upon internally as a "tragic figure" reassigned to a minor make-work project. The manager's future survivability is solely based on staying billable. The manager could be a star again if someone would take the time and effort to help rebuild a shattered self-image.

In this situation, the basic premise is that new managers either get trained or are run over by their own subordinates. Furthermore, it is very unfortunate when managers are "blown out of the water" by their own incompetence. We can only hope that inexperienced managers are smart enough to recognize their own deficiencies. They will need to grow into the job, and more importantly,

rely on their subordinates to achieve success. Talented subordinates leaving a company because of a poor manager can devastate an organization.

Applying this scenario to my promotion dilemma, it came down to past service versus future goals. In my position, I had only one single criterion—whether the candidate would do the future job exceptionally well. The past might be an indicator, but we cannot treat the future of our organizations by flying backwards. Unfortunately, the employee looking for the reward did not like the outcome. Businesses cannot afford to use promotions as rewards. Rewards are for a job already done well, and come in the form of raises, bonuses, and recognition. Promotions are for the job to be done. They must be given for prospective—not retrospective reasons.

Nevertheless, we still took care of the reward-based employee who contributed professionally and, in turn, was rewarded accordingly (for example, raises, bonuses, and recognition). This employee may not have understood my reasoning, but accepted the satisfaction and the reward. The goal-based employee who focused on the future—from a career and company perspective—became a successful manager, and may end up overrunning me! Neither of us could be happier with the outcome. A manager cannot do any better than be promoted into success rather than from success, which is the difference between the past being a bucket of ashes, and turning the future into one. ☒