

‘Peter who? Peter what? ...’

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Book stall discovery

Have you ever discovered a professional gem while rummaging through a book stall at a charity market? I did! In a bush town called Nelligen in the recent school holidays, I discovered another ‘bible’ for people managers and the source of this article in *HIM-I*. The book was titled *The Peter Principle*, authored by Dr Laurence J Peter and Raymond Hull. It was first published in February, 1969.

Background to ‘the Principle’

Dr Laurence J Peter was a scientist who had, for many years, focused on ‘the study of incompetence’. However, he was too busy with paperwork, teaching and his ongoing research to publish his findings. Fortunately, Raymond Hull offered to collaborate with Dr Peter to publish this book¹. As an educator, Dr Peter had noticed that ‘a number of teachers, school principals, supervisors and superintendents appeared to be unaware of their professional responsibilities and incompetent in executing their duties’. However, when looking elsewhere he discovered that the ‘local school system did not have a monopoly on incompetence’. Dr Peter believed that the traditional placement of employees tended to follow ‘rules’ that create incompetence at all levels in the hierarchy, which led him to study the ways employees move up the hierarchy. His research uncovered hundreds of cases of ‘occupational incompetence’, and thus the Peter Principle was established. Dr Peter explained that ‘in a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence’. He pioneered the new science of ‘hierarchyology’, arguing that when an employee reaches his level of incompetence, ‘nothing fails like success!’ (Peter & Hull 1969: 1-7; 49).

Relevance for Health Information Managers

Of course, the ‘Peter Principle’ is not without its critics, who argue that Dr Peter did not evolve his theory from case studies of real companies, that his research reflects a bias towards the education industry, and the theory ignores the fact that people can learn and develop new

competencies on the job.² However, as managers, we are often heard to say ‘he/she is has reached the Peter Principle’. ‘Peter’s’ name is quoted time and time again and discussed at length in tea rooms, at seminars, on the job, over lunch, in meetings, among friends, to name a few situations. We are professional managers as we have studied for a university management qualification. Our particular science covers the management of health information and management of people. It is vital to understand the theories of management and to recognise them in action in the workplace. We cannot manage a situation if we are unaware of the dynamics at play. As managers we must ‘manage’ ourselves too. We must consolidate our education and training requirements for our current positions. We must acknowledge our strengths and limitations if we want to be promoted. Then we will be in a position to organise further education and training as we strive to be the most competent person for the job.

In the workplace, we will never achieve complete ‘control’ of a situation. However, to achieve a positive outcome (i.e. a ‘win win’), management strategies must be researched and referenced. Dr Peter implies you must have insight and not blame others for your difficulties. Then you must take responsibility for your actions. This is good management. Theories may exist for research into management issues but it is our management of these theories that makes a ‘good manager’.

From a personal perspective, upon completion of the Associate Diploma in Medical Record Administration in December 1977, I commenced as the Assistant Medical Record Administrator (MRA) at St Vincent’s Hospital, Darlinghurst. Miss Rosemary Bull was my Manager and there were approximately other 25 staff members reporting to the MRAs. At 20 years of age, with such a professional responsibility for staff, I believed I needed further education. I commenced a Certificate in Personnel Administration (now the science of human resources) at TAFE³, six hours per week for four years. Due to the dedicated Head of School and part-time teachers from industry, we received theory and practical training, including site visits, which also provided the opportunity for further discussions and assignments undertaken with non-health colleagues.

¹ Mr Hull was a TV and stage play producer and writer. Dr Peter graduated with a PhD in Education from Washington State University and at the time of this writing was Associate Professor of Education, Director of the Evelyn Frieden Center for Prescriptive Teachings and Coordinator of Programs for Emotionally disturbed Children at the University of Southern California.

² <http://www.referenceforbusiness.com/encyclopedia/Per-Pro/Peter-Principle.html>

³ College of Technical and Advanced Education.

As managers we have a professional responsibility for our own ongoing education, our standing in the organisation we work in and for the staff we manage. Our staff contribute significantly to the efficiency of the processes we manage. Processes, either paper-based or electronic, are inherent in all organisations, and no less in health-care facilities. Health Information Managers (HIMs), with our intense education in human resource management and health information management (including medical science and behavioural science) and our inherent tenacity (otherwise we would not be a HIM!), have a significant role to play in whatever organisation we choose to work in. We are in a pivotal position in these dynamic times of e-health, personally-controlled electronic health records, medical record scanning, processing of accurate clinical coding systems, commissioning of functional patient administration systems, health informatics training and education, casemix/funding, design of systems, membership of teams with IT specialists and managing staff. We must aim always to be competent at whatever level we participate in the hierarchy: that is the professional way.

Reference

Peter, L.J. and Hull, R. (1969). *The Peter Principle: why things always go wrong*. Bantam Books, published by arrangement with William Morrow & Co., New York.

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When Peter gains the throne, who does he rule with? His half-brother. Who acted as a regent to the boys? Peter's half sister Sophia. What happened to a portion of Peter's family? They were murdered. Peter witnessed this. Where did Peter spend much of his youth? Outside of court. What happens to Peter's half brother? He dies. This allows Peter to begin individual rule in 1689. What happens to Sophia? Peter makes Sophia become a nun. What did Peter believe? To compete with European powers, he had to bring advances to Russia. Where did Peter travel from 1697 to 1698? Europe. How did Peter Weber Pick on 'The Bachelor'? By Sara Belcher. Updated 2 months ago. Season 24 of The Bachelor is finally at an end and we now know who Pilot Pete picked. Although Peter had just broken Hannah Ann's heart, it wasn't too long before he was given the chance to try to get things right with Madison. Host Chris Harrison ventured to Auburn, Ala. to talk to Madison about what went down and to see if she was interested in trying again with Peter, knowing now that he had truly chosen her. "It's been really hard," Madison said when Chris asked how she was dealing, post-breakup. "That was a hard day and it's been honestly even harder coming back and processing everything...I'm just trying my best not to live in the p