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Let me say that again. *One of the most potentially poisonous life circumstances is when we let our God-directed personal mentoring or advocacy for a person get confused with that person's true level of professional competence.*

So, you *did* hear that right! Heh. Let me explain...Biblically.

You know, of course, that God calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves. So, of course, I have to start out by challenging you on that alone. Are you really, truly, effectively engaged in the daily business of loving everyone you come into meaningful contact with? In real life, part of that would mean that you work to find characteristics in every person that you can nurture, develop, do your small but important part in growing that person into greatness. Now, that focus on people in your sphere may be on professional attributes, but it could just as likely be help on career management or perhaps a deeper anchoring of character. Honestly, since many relationships are where you spend maybe a couple of hours a day together, it's probably likely that it's an intertwined mesh of several such dimensions.

Maybe you're actually appointed to that role in your workplace...perhaps a formal mentoring role or a boss position that helps the enterprise grow people into maturity and greatness. Or perhaps it's just a Holy Spirit-appointed role that is more informal, just a supernatural working of a relationship into meaningful connection. Regardless, be sure to handle these relationships with great care!

Are you doing the specifics of these types of connection very intentionally? Don't get me wrong here: it can be just a simple but anointed conversation a couple of times a week—an inspired word that connects for that person emotionally, developmentally, spiritually. Before you know it, you can find yourself becoming an ongoing mentor for that person. Well now, friend, that mentoring is one powerful way of loving your neighbor!

And that's what we mean when we started this out—a wonderful, God-directed personal connection for those in your spheres of activity. You hide and watch: real fruits can come out of that kind of intentionality!

And that's all great, wonderful, hunky-dory...until you happen to elevate all of that to the level of helping to unwisely promote that person to a role—a professional competence—that they are not capable of. Unfortunately, that type of thing happens quite often in the majority of enterprises. And, sad to say, Christian organizations are no exception—in fact, Christians seem to be particularly susceptible to this.

You see, once we have invested all that time and effort into a person, it's pretty hard on the human relations side of things to back off when they are getting ready to get in over their head. After all, who wants to stand in the way of an expanded opportunity, more influence, or the increased income of a promotion—especially when you've been their mentor, their advocate, their cheerleader...?

But then, a fresh, ugly reality sets in: it only takes a bit of time and activity to reveal that this person is over their head. Perhaps they were a technical person and this new level requires real people skills that really aren't in this person's wheelhouse. Perhaps the previous role was departmental and now a much broader set of integration skills is needed in the new position.

There's a name for this, you know—not necessarily in mentoring but in job promotions in general. Dr. Laurence Peter, a Canadian sociologist, gave this phenomenon a name, *The Peter Principle*, as the title of his book published in the 1960s. And so that phrase has been uttered billions of times in enterprises over the past five decades or so—something whispered like this: “Fred is way over his head now in this new position...you know, it's a clear case of the Peter Principle.” You see, here's the irony: the person can often

be very competent in the position they came from—that’s why they were promoted! But, ironically, the enterprise *incompetently* promotes many such competent people to the next level...to the level of their personal incompetence. That’s the Peter Principle.

Of course, the clear reality is that the problem isn’t rooted in Fred at all...in fact, for purposes of assessing responsibility, almost none of the problem is rooted in Fred’s behavior and approaches. Indeed, the primary responsibility for the problem lies with the enterprise itself. That is, the leaders of the enterprise don’t have the commitment to excellence and the necessary, related processes—like mentoring—that minimize the chances of this happening once, let alone consistently. So, here are some indicators that an enterprise is easily susceptible to the Peter Principle...especially when several such indicators are routine.

- Confusing “average” with “excellent”—and that’s nearly the rule in many organizations
- Substituting the easy hiring of persons of questionable quality from outside the enterprise for the hard work of growing persons of greatness within the enterprise
- Confusing the easy reliance on credentials with the hard work of ascertaining real competence
- Believing that low compensation levels are automatically the right stewardship (note that many Christian ministries assume that God will supposedly call the best people to sacrifice for the sake of ministry finances—but this often leads those competent Christians to go to a secular enterprise so that they have enough money to be good stewards for their families and giving opportunities!)
- Tolerating poor formal and on-the-job training—or having little to no training at all
- Fostering weak mentoring inside the enterprise, including an unwillingness to tell people that they personally have already reached the highest level possible for their current skill set
- When mistakes are made, allowing the Peter Principle to fester and then settle into many roles
- Allowing people who personify the Peter Principle to actually perpetuate it in the enterprise

Here’s the deal. If you are a mentor or discipler or boss, you may well be the key line of defense to keep the Peter Principle from happening to that person you have responsibility for. That person surely doesn’t want—and *shouldn’t* want—to be incompetent in the position they are placed in every day, either in perception or in reality—even if it’s a promotion. No, that’s *especially* true if it is a promotion!

Worse, if that person is a Christian, they are compromising their witness for Christ as they obliviously wreak havoc and sow deep frustrations in the enterprise. Even worse—because it’s controllable by you—*your* witness is compromised by the promotion of incompetence, whether you’re inside the enterprise or not. This default mode that’s literally helping to create the Peter Principle...*this* is following Jesus?

Simply put, as Christians, we should have the fortitude to mentor properly, fully, completely—nothing less. Our personal role as mentors requires the maturity that real mentoring deserves. So, let’s revisit where we started. And I quote: *One of the most potentially poisonous life circumstances is when we let our God-directed personal mentoring or advocacy get confused with that person’s true level of professional competence.*

Yes, your mentee could well be CEO-level material. But maybe not. Or...at least *not yet*. And a promotion that comes before personal readiness for the role is a real problem for everyone. So, avoid mentoring your mentees to *their* personal Peter Principle. Instead, just dig in and help bring them to that next level!

The final twist? As a mentor, are you truly doing a great job...or fulfilling the Peter Principle yourself?

