

In your workplace, are you more of a generalist or a specialist? Wait, here's a better question! *Because* you are more one than the other, what's the key hazard of being a generalist versus being a specialist?

Well, let's get a couple kinds of profiles out of the way from the start. If you are a competent brain surgeon, then you are definitely a specialist—and every one of your patients wants you that way! Even when medical doctors are family practice MD's from highly regarded universities, there's not much appetite from patients for such doctors opening up skulls and wielding sharp scalpels or super-micro tools.

Let's face it. We live in a specialized world, and we need very specialized experts doing the surgeries, the electrical work, the building of bridges...all that technical stuff. In fact, the full degree and competency of specialization for all the products and services we take for granted in a place like America is one of the great *unremarked-upon* privileges of our day. So a big "thank you" to all you high-end specialists out there!

And one of the key developments that recognizes all of this has been the explosion of deeper specializations and certifications beyond or supplementing full degrees from universities. In the medical field, for example, it's often called out as "board certifications." In a broad field like business, there are lots of certifications in many of the general classifications of business—from finance to accounting to marketing to project management to IT. All that has been a very helpful development.

Except when it isn't! Sometimes people can be very good test-takers and certificate-getters and still end up as very poor, unsavvy real-world practitioners anyway. Or their certified skills can soon become outdated. As the tried-and-true legal saying goes, "buyer beware" of the services being offered!

But even when specialists actually do know a whole lot of specialist things, they often need to know a whole lot more things that aren't seemingly of direct relevance to them. That's simply because we live in increasingly interconnected systems—and the world is always driving more and deeper interconnections.

For medical doctors, a key interconnected system is the human body itself—and the expansion of what I would call "micro-knowledge" about each part of the body is astounding! But important interconnected systems also include hospitals and their configurations and services. And interconnectedness also includes pharmaceutical developments in their industry sector. And insurance and legal changes. You get the idea!

And, you know, business and nonprofit organizations are no different with regard to interconnectedness. Please forgive the childlike analogy, but the marketing bone is connected to the operations bone and also connected to the legal bone. In fact, the marketing bone is connected to every other key bone in the organization: yes, the operations bone and the legal bone, but also to the data analytics bone and the finance bone and the management bone and the HR bone and the IT bone...again, you get the idea.

And it's likely you know this is because of *your* lived-out experiences in *your* organization, where lightweight managers have often "siloe" themselves—yeah, they've isolated themselves—so they don't truly adequately know enough about the other major areas of a 21st-century-capable organization, knowledge that's vital to the enterprise...at least where it *should* be in the 21st-century. Yeah, you know that when your key managers silo themselves, your organization is seriously not where it should be!

Now you might think that that would foster humility in such siloe managers and executives. But it's often actually the opposite—they can easily become arrogant, trying to wield their specialty as a weapon for keeping power and preserving turf. That doesn't mean they are automatically arrogant *in style*...but they often *are* quietly arrogant in self-serving intent and results. So they end up weakening their organization.

So, to *truly* be at the top of their game in order to be great stewards for their organization, specialists need to become and sustain being knowledgeable in multiple areas. This allows them to properly integrate their daily role with other key areas in the organization. But here's the thing: where are they going to learn this...or to see this modeled...or both?

Well, truthfully, the pickings can be pretty slim here. That's because many who are key executives or even CEOs in organizations perceive themselves as generalists who pretty much simply rely on specialists in key areas like IT, HR, legal, finance, and product-centric issues. Problem is, these generalists' lack of specialized expertise in crucial areas are such that they are not just delegating to their key managers, they are actually routinely abdicating to their multiple managers' judgments and actions. Yes, that's *abdicating*, which basically means they stop managing the area they are ultimately responsible for. And what a mess that creates, maybe not today, not tomorrow, or not even next year...but it's a sure route to long-term disaster.

Sadly, the phenomenon of these top executives abdicating is in epidemic status in complex societies. And then mid-level managers have *only seen and experienced the dysfunction of top executives* who routinely abdicate to specialist managers...yeah...who have siloed themselves! This creates a compounding effect, because mid-level people excuse themselves from high expectations when their leaders abdicate at *their* level. In my observations over decades, this occurs a whole lot in both Christian and secular organizations.

You might say, "Education is the answer!" Well, that's a start. For Christian leaders, applying Biblical practices is of paramount importance. But seminaries have been criticized for decades, often by many pastors themselves, for the lack of preparation in managing the org side of Christian mission. Oh no, you might say, ministries are not supposed to be run like a business! If so, why can they go "out of business?" Hey, great stewardship is God's standard for Christians everywhere, no matter the organization's mission!

And in business, don't count on degrees like an MBA. Some are awesome, but many can be spotty in quality, integration, and practical value, even if they enjoy prestige. Also, real-world time spent in many a bureaucratic enterprise can be a danger signal for actually learning *wrong!* And don't count on glitzy bullet points on resumes. In short, you need to wisely probe each possible hire—yeah, you gotta be discerning!

All this is understandable, because each area of expertise has become complex. But, for the Christian, it's simply unacceptable to accept a poorly-stewarded future. And, no, the Lord hasn't spoken to you to take a leadership position where you are not truly equipped to be a great steward. Sadly, that posture seems to be fairly commonplace!

So, let's recap. Here's what we can pretty clearly say are the overarching, key hazards when it comes to specialists *and* generalists. Often organizations have specialists who haven't endeavored to truly know enough specifics about the disciplines adjacent to or relying upon their expertise. Then, organizations can easily have top leadership who abdicate to key people without challenging, guiding, and integrating astutely. But thank the Lord for all those diligent individuals—Christians or not—who are careful not to let their ambition lead them to accept positions where their lack of gifting, background, and savvy renders them incompetent! OK. So, you want a clear list for a path ahead...for you and for others? Here goes.

First, be *very competent in your discipline and be very curious about adjacent disciplines* that you naturally serve or integrate with. Expect that of people you hire or supervise. If your employees are deficient, either redeem and groom them or, if they are unwilling or unable, phase them out. Stewardship requires that.

Second, be sure to be a top knowledge worker who is *adept at keeping up* with emerging professional and technology changes. Again, expect *that* of people in your enterprise. If your workers are deficient, either redeem and groom them or, if they are unwilling or unable, phase them out. Stewardship requires *that*.

Third, be *prepared if top managers in your organization—even the CEO—are deficient in these ways* and do your best to diplomatically redeem the situation, as you are able. This will train and prepare you for the future. If one or more of these executives *is* proficient, praise God and learn all you can from them!

The summary? Honor God by being the *best specialist* who is more than enough of a generalist too...or by being the *best generalist* who won't abide having to abdicate. That is truly your witness! Handle with care.

A&A: Application & Action

1. Is your current workplace position necessarily casting you as more as a generalist or more as a specialist? Either way, rate your success at handling the hazards of your current category from 1 to 10, with “10” your being highly successful. Discuss that fully, in context. Give examples.
2. If you are on track to be a specialist in your career, identify the top three categories to emphasize to ensure you avoid the key “specialist” hazard (e.g., “need to properly know adjacent areas in the organization better”). If you are on track to be (or aspire to be) a generalist in your career, identify the top three categories to emphasize to ensure you avoid the key “generalist” hazard (e.g., “need to know technology developments better so as not to abdicate”). Now describe how you plan to address these types of categories.
3. How are you doing as a top “knowledge worker” in your work life? What strategies work for you best in keeping up with everything you need to know? Be specific.