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Responsibility for Unsuccessful Promotions

Inappropriate promotions result in ethical and personal costs to people and their organizations.

Q. *Highly skilled clinical people are frequently promoted to management positions, but many fail to perform successfully in their new role. Is this an ethical issue? If so, how can it be avoided?*

A. Commonly, organizations view promoting an employee as an opportunity to reward excellent work and loyalty. Although well motivated, such an action is clearly not justified if the individual is unqualified to assume supervisory responsibility. People can be attracted by more status and compensation, but if they lack management skills and interest, we unintentionally do them a great disservice by assuming everyone must want to experience the “joys” of an administrative role.

This issue is not simply an ethical matter. Nonetheless, appointing a managerially unskilled person and/or failing to deal with an incompetent supervisor can carry a very significant ethical cost. Inappropriate decisions by such an individual not only may compromise patient care but also can adversely affect subordinates, peers, and the person to whom he or she reports. Therefore, everyone is potentially compromised, including the new supervisor.

The virtues of internal promotions are important to recognize. Every progressive organization should encourage employees to pursue career advancement within their organization. Candidates for entry-level positions are usually attracted to an employer that has a strong record of internal promotions, and current staff members are more likely to remain if they witness tangible evidence of such activity. In addition, promoting an internal applicant is almost always easier, faster, and less costly than appointing someone from outside. Finally, the level of comfort and familiarity with a current employee is usually much higher in comparison with an external applicant.

Prevalence of False Assumptions

Several widely held false assumptions help explain why people are often promoted beyond their level of competency.

- A person with good technical or clinical skills is qualified for a supervisory position. Because this employee is an exemplary nurse, pharmacist, physical therapist, social worker, laboratory or X-ray technologist, he or she surely will be an excellent manager.
- Every nonsupervisory employee aspires to have a management position. We have gauged our own success based upon progressing through

the administrative ranks, so we believe the same is true of others.

- Individuals are unlikely to be seduced by the allure of higher pay and benefits, a new title, and perhaps an office if they are not genuinely interested in the promotion. Although these factors are important to us, the average person will be able to look objectively at the advantages and disadvantages of the new role.
- Someone invited by a supervisor, department head, or senior executive to apply for a specific opening will be entirely comfortable in declining the invitation. Despite the implicit expectation that the person will be flattered, we cannot imagine that the individual would hesitate to turn down the suggestion if there were any serious reservations.

Steps to Prevent Unwise Appointments

Five steps are recommended to avoid the problems associated with appointing unqualified candidates:

1. Do not underestimate the leadership, planning, financial, and other skills required to perform effectively as a supervisor; make sure that the position description accurately documents the full range of responsibilities.
2. Avoid rationalizing that the time, effort, and cost of external recruitment are not worth the investment, even when viable internal candidates are available; encourage such candidates to apply to facilitate a fair comparison of qualifications.
3. Do not understate the number or magnitude of challenges inherent

in the position during the interview process; a full disclosure of these challenges and the organization's expectations permits an informed decision by the successful candidate and reduces the likelihood of subsequent recriminations.

4. Identify employees who have the potential for advancement and an interest in promotional opportunities; encourage them to participate in supervisory development courses and to attend selected seminars and conferences.
5. Provide sufficient financial incentives and status to reward staff with superior skills who do not have an interest in or aptitude for significant administrative responsibility.

Almost every organization has some supervisors who are marginally capable. The managers to whom they report could be reluctant to take disciplinary action because it is personally painful and difficult. Rationalizations abound: The supervisor has been with the organization for a long time, is such a nice person, is close to retirement, is related to an influential member of the medical staff or board of trustees, is the sole income earner for the family, is likely to file a complaint, etc. An effective executive, however, who is administratively competent and ethically sensitive will take steps to minimize the number of such supervisors by creating and sustaining an organizational culture in which only truly qualified candidates are encouraged to be applicants. ▲

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