



The Transitive Fallacy *Presumption of “Ability”*

We are not likely to presume that a football lineman would make a good brain surgeon, or a circus clown would make a fine diplomat, or that a dress designer would make a good auto manufacturing executive. My examples are extreme, yet in dramatic ways we make the same kinds of decisions at all levels of society and government with varying degrees of success. The basic fallacy is that if someone is good at *A*, they will also be good at *B*, even though *A* and *B* are totally unrelated activities and require vastly differing skills.

There are, of course, many successful examples of such transitions that speak to the exceptional qualities of individuals, but there are many more examples of unsuccessful transitions that are quickly swept under the rug of time with public facing rationalizations for mistakes. We have a national gift for paving over the potholes of our bad decisions.

Business and industry deals with this problem repeatedly, and mostly out of public view. Success at one functional level leads to promotion and often different responsibilities. The process repeats until the individual rises to the top but can and often is derailed by the Peter Principle along the way. Carly Fiorina’s burn-out at Hewlett Packard is among the most public of examples. Highly successful entrepreneurs are not uncommonly removed by their own boards because the skill set for managing a growing corporation is vary different from the skills that launched the company to begin with.

Colleges and Universities are no exception. A popular and successful Ivy League English Professor becomes Dean of the Arts College and is removed after one year because of a million-dollar budget overrun. A gifted Music Professor is made Provost, and before he can be removed is recruited by as President of a major research university and retired with much fanfare after two years.

That leads me to government, or more to the point, politics. The application of the Peter Principle in the professional ranks of government are legendary, but less public. Incompetence in elected officials and political appointments are more public, often have grave consequences, and lay bare a painful weakness in the principles of democracy. The electorate, by and large, defer to perceived authority. Underlying their choices is the persistent myth that people who are rich

and/or successful are masters of the universe and can do anything. Tevia sings in Fiddler, "*When you're rich they think you really know.*" How often in the face of political disappointment have you heard, "*What we need in our government is successful businesspeople.*" When I complained to a friend about the institutionalization of the *transitive fallacy* in our current political government, they said, "Cheer up, things could be worse." So, I cheered up and things got worse.

Gene Ziegler, Chandler Arizona April 2020