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• LABOR AND MANAGEMENT

When a worker is promoted above his boss

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Is it possible for an ordinary worker to be promoted ahead of his department supervisor or even the manager due to the former's consistent above-average work performance? What are the implications? Is it advisable for top management to do this as a matter of routine? — Looking Around.

Once, I went inside the rest room of a fastfood restaurant and was surprised by a note hanging on the hot air hand dryer installed near the door. The message was clear and succinct: “Push here for a word from the boss.”

Apparently, the note came from a disgruntled person working in that establishment. It may not be conclusive, but most of the time, such note is a manifestation of someone who is not happy with management or its recent decisions. If management sees such notes, it would be easy to dismiss it with a devil-may-care attitude, if not with a defeatist comment like “we can’t please everyone.”

Of course, it is possible to please everyone by doing what’s necessary under the circumstances. As part of management, being convincing to as many people as possible is a necessity, whether you’re trying to motivate someone, pitching a proposal, mediating a dispute between workers, or making that difficult decision to promote someone ahead of his boss.

We’ve heard it before. It’s another test case between meritocracy and seniority. This issue of promoting a meritorious worker over a senior management official could create more problems than solutions. That’s why cases like this in real life are very few and far between.

It can happen. However, it’s not advisable to do it as a matter of routine. Doing so would only create a situation where corporate mentoring and training could suffer. Takehiko Harada, former president of Toyota Taiwan, says “you need to be really careful that you don’t promote the student over her teacher.”

We know where Harada is coming from as Japanese management is known for its lifetime employment and seniority system, which are well-entrenched. But even without being Japanese, the logic is very easy to understand.

If you promote someone ahead of the mentor and make it a corporate practice, then the latter would always have a good reason to be selfish in sharing his skill: “Why would I share my knowledge to this person who will be promoted ahead of me?” Conversely, if you have a firm policy of protecting the senior guys and all the supervisors or managers out there, they would be more than happy to share what they know about the job and beyond.

This can only be done if those supervisors and managers are mandated to train their workers and make it part of their key performance indicators. If you can’t train your workers to do your job, that means supervisors or managers can’t be promoted as well.

However, meritocracy is not exactly an airtight argument against seniority. “In the kind of meritocracy that companies try to implement, people progress linearly: The very best alpha sits on high, with a team of betas reporting to him (occasionally her), and so on, all the way down to the omegas working the machines, dealing with the customers, and so on.

“This approach doesn’t add up for three reasons,” according to London Business School professor Nigel Nicholson in “The False Theory of Meritocracy” as published in the *Harvard Business Review*.

One, meritocracy “suggests that people can’t ever change their grades, so to speak — for better or worse. This is plainly false. Even if we are initially incompetent in a new role, we usually do get the hang of it and improve.” If not, the line executive who can’t (or doesn’t want to) improve his performance for any reason even after top management has called his attention to it, must be replaced, but not necessarily by one of his junior workers.

Two, meritocracy “ignores the fact that our value or talent depends on circumstances. Native American tribes often had different chiefs for peace and war. But in the corporate realm we demand men and women for all seasons. Advancement in organizations operates on the ratchet principle. There are occasional demotions, but mostly it is a one-way trip up, with occasional exit points where people are pushed off the ladder into the void.”

Last, “you can’t reduce a person’s value to a single letter or number on a scale of merit. We know that A’s are destined for leadership, B’s for middle management, and C’s for lower positions, right? Some may protest that it’s much more sophisticated than that — that HR managers can deploy all kinds of talent-assessment tools and competency models to steer people into the slots that best fit them.”

That’s why you need to do a lot of things with the active help of HR. This requires not making an instantaneous decision between the wisdom of meritocracy and the folly of seniority or vice versa. We have to do a lot of things like evaluating the potential of a meritorious junior worker, no matter how consistent he has shown in his many years, compared with the demands and stresses of the job.

Really, meritocracy alone can’t tell you the full story.