

"I knew when they approached me to take over the department that I was getting in over my head. Even so, it was a heady feeling. I had positioned myself perfectly, never really thinking about how I would perform if I actually got the slot."

The speaker is a University of Michigan chemistry grad, now working for a large Detroit-based pharmaceutical firm. Less than two months after being made department head, he was demoted for poor performance and returned to his former work group. "That in itself wasn't so bad," he says. "It was losing face at the company that hurt."

If you think this is an isolated case, think again. Corporate America has always harbored its share of would-be wunderkinder who bit off more than they could chew. Indeed, Laurence J. Peter crystallized the phenomenon in 1969 with his now-famous Peter Principle: "In a hierarchy, individuals tend to rise to their levels of incompetence."

Particularly susceptible are hard-charging new graduates whose goal is to distance themselves from the dreaded "entry-level" label as quickly as possible. Yet even for the less driven, avoiding the Peter Principle requires a balancing act. On the one hand is the need for promotions and increased responsibilities; on

the other, the danger of overstepping your ability to do the job. Perhaps the best advice is the old proverb: Be careful what you wish for because you might get it.

"Management likes to identify successful people at a lower level, no matter what the field," says Charles Humes, a professor of counselor education at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg. "They feel that because you've been successful at a lower level, you should be successful at a higher level."

To avoid the perils of a premature promotion, career experts recommend three courses of action: Establish a solid track record; be honest with yourself about your strengths, weaknesses and developmental needs; and learn to say no without closing the door on future opportunities.

Real accomplishments

"One big pitfall with aggressive young professionals is that they tend to live for today and fail to establish a basic track record," says

How Not to Get In Over Your Head

By **Michael F. Kastre**

Among the hazards of the fast track is the risk of being promoted beyond your level of competence

