

# **The Problems of Administrative Success with Alternative Strategies For Dealing With Them**

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Most professionals endeavor for success, which is frequently self-defined. Some level of success usually brings with it a promotion into an administrative position. If an entire organization is successful, few problems with administrative success are encountered. But if a professional achieves administrative success when others in the organization have not or not at the same level, then problems can and do occur with increasing frequency as success levels increase.

## **The Concept**

Over a period of years, I have had discussions with talented Engineering Management and Industrial Engineering administrators who had enviable records of accomplishment. All too frequently, the successes stopped in a relatively short time and varieties of problems ensued. Only when considered as connected data does the possibility that such events are not isolated but related. This paper considers the problems of success in these areas in an organized format. All concepts and tables are based on the experiences that have been gathered and analyzed in an attempt to learn from them.

Talented, energetic people, particularly engineers are characteristically promoted into management. Skills, hard work, communication skills, talented peers and subordinates and other factors tend to lead to success. Success in small projects tends to lead to larger scale opportunities. Early success leads the progressing administrator to believe that he or she will be continually successful. Such success blinds the administrator to other support that is necessary for continuing success.

Discussions with administrators who were successful over a long period of time revealed that success frequently came to an abrupt halt. The reasons for this abrupt halt have been categorized and discussed in this paper. Several successful administrators revealed that the level of their success played a role in the demise of their success. Very successful people were the most vulnerable to countering moves within their organizations. This sounds counterintuitive but it is real to those who experienced it.

Each of the success limiting attributes is discussed below.

- The extent to which unit goals are an integral part of the goals of the larger organization. Highly successful units that are not important to the larger organization are an example of this attribute. If an Engineering Management unit in a college of engineering is very successful due to strong leadership and talented faculty, it may be considered important to the college and not be recognized or rewarded. The unit may be treated as a “cash cow”

where resources are siphoned off to benefit the larger engineering departments. The draining of resources can lead to eventual failure. Raises and promotions are not as prevalent in the “starved” unit as those in other departments and key faculty tend to leave for other, more rewarding organizations.

- The extent to which the unit has access to adequate resources (frequently self generated). Success is a function of access to resources at critical times. It may not be possible to serve a specific client base without access to funds for equipment, faculty or technicians. Even though these costs may be recovered in the early days of the effort, the higher administration may not be amenable to front end funding. As with the attribute above, access to funding is a function of unit priority. Units with low priority tend to get less access to funding, even when the funding can generate a return on the investment. Both key personnel and specialized equipment are necessary for success and access to them is far from automatic.
- The extent to which the unit has peer support and cooperation. Success is easier when the larger organization encourages peers to participate in unit activities. If the unit has a high priority with the administration, other key staffers and faculty will be rewarded for participation in the effort. Without this support, success is more difficult. Support is a function of a specific leader. If the leader changes, support may also change. For example, if a new dean establishes other priorities, then peers will apply their efforts to activities more likely to be rewarded.
- The existence of at least two “godfathers” who support the unit with high administrative levels. “Godfather” in this instance comes from In Search Of Excellence. Peters and Waterman use this term to describe a person in a position to influence administrative decisions. The Godfather can speed slow academic processes, provide temporary funding, loan key personnel to the project and a lot of other important but behind the scenes support. If the Godfather loses influence or leaves the position, all of the existing decision capital is lost.

The instrument shown below (Figure 1.) was developed to assess the environment for success that a professional or administrator may encounter. The instrument was developed conceptually from the discussions above and has not been validated.

**Figure 1. Instrument to Measure Environment for Success**

Attribute 1

Goals of the Unit are an integral part of the goals of the organization as a whole.

Not related	Some relationship	Closely related
1	3	5

Attribute 2

Access to Resources

Very limited access to resources	Access is not related to needs	Reasonable access to needed resources
1	3	5

Attribute 3

Peer Support and Cooperation

Little support, peers are discouraged  
By management

1

Peers are willing, little  
encouragement by management

3

Peers are willing and manage-  
ment is supportive

5

Attribute 4.

Access to Technology

Lack of adequate equipment  
And personnel

1

Adequate access to equipment  
but not personnel

3

Adequate access to both  
equipment and personnel

5

Attribute 5

Presence of Active “Godfathers”

No “Godfathers” support the unit

1

There is one influential “Godfather”

3

There are two active, influen-  
tial “Godfathers” in place

5

Success Environment Measure

Low success environment – total score is <15

Moderate success environment – total score is 15 <19

High success environment – 20 and above

The cases described below were selected from conversations with professionals who had experienced a high measure of success that diminished in a short period of time. The instrument in Figure 1 was used to assess the environment of success in each situation. The names and situations have been altered to prevent identification and to focus on salient points.

**Illustrative Cases**

**Case 1**

A U.S. Army base near MidSouth University requested that the University develop an engineering management graduate program for its officers and contractors. The MidSouth Chancellor began a search for an experienced professor to develop this program and to begin teaching classes as soon as possible. Professor David Johnson was identified as the best person for the job. He was with the university system at another campus and could begin the next semester and could be on loan part time in a few weeks. Another professor and MidSouth was interested in working in the new program and had appropriate credentials. The Chancellor made sure that the new EM program had the resources needed and authorized a distance-learning component to serve officers who transferred to other bases. The Base Commander and the Chancellor, together, made sure that the EM program got off to a good start.

Enrollment grew from 70 students, all part time, in the initial semester to over 200 at the end of the second year. It was at this point, the end of the second year that the base commander was transferred to another base. The new Base Commander was not as supportive but did not discourage enrollment. The distance learning effort continued to expand that with the Chancellor’s support, enrollment continued to grow to a maximum of 300 students.

In the eighth year of the program, the Chancellor resigned to take a higher-level position with another university. His replacement expressed antagonism for the EM program and did not understand how it was allowed to grow in a research-oriented university. After two weeks on the job, he asked for the resignation of Dr. Johnson. Dr. Johnson was tenured and declined the request to resign. He started developing a series of “white papers” showing the value of the EM program to the university. The additional information did seem to mitigate the negative actions of the new chancellor to some degree.

After many sleepless nights, Dr. Johnson decided to take a job at another university – developing another engineering management program.

### **Success Environment Measure**

Assessment of the success environment is shown below.

Attribute 1, Goals - 1

Attribute 2, Support - 1

Attribute 3, Peer Support - 3

Attribute 4, Access to Technology - 3

Attribute 5, Support of “Godfathers” - 1

Success Environment Measure – 9

Conclusion: low probability for success.

### **Case 2**

In the early 1990’s, the Industrial Engineering Department of Central South University was struggling to survive. Enrollment was declining. Two of the ten full time faculty members had left. Contracts and grants were lower than other departments and were declining. There was talk of merging the department with Mechanical Engineering, which both departmental faculties were against, or closing down the department entirely. The Dean agreed to a plan developed by the IE Department. The plan included hiring a new faculty member with ties to industry and government. The new faculty member might be able to recruit more students and attract contracts.

After a lengthy search, Dr. Franklin Wentz was hired. Dr. Wentz was Vice President for Operations at a local government contractor and was already an adjunct teacher for the IE Department. He took early retirement from the contractor and was already familiar with the departmental curriculum. He was very energetic and developed a plan to visit local industries, junior colleges and high schools to recruit students. He also used his contacts to start the process to develop contracts with local industries.

After two years, Dr. Wentz’s efforts began to pay off. Undergraduate and graduate student population were up 20%. Contracts and grants had increased to almost one million dollars annually and were increasing. Dr. Wentz had convinced industries to contract with departmental faculty and students to help them identify and solve persistent problems. Initial efforts proved successful to both the university and the companies.

Four years after hiring Dr. Wentz, the Central South University hired a new chancellor. After a year of intensive study, the new chancellor announced that he would lead Central South to become a “top tier” research university. All departments in the colleges of science and engineering would be evaluated for

their track record for attracting grants to do basic research. Dr. Wentz was advised to apply for National Science Foundation grants and to phase out of local industry support activities. Other faculty members in the department were actively discouraged from working on Wentz's industry projects. No one in the upper administration was willing to support Wentz's industry initiatives.

After reviewing the situation, Dr. Wentz still hasn't determined whether to seek a position with another university or to attempt to comply with the chancellor's mandate.

### **Success Environment Measure**

The assessment instrument would indicate the following scores.

Attribute 1, Goals - 1

Attribute 2, Support - 1

Attribute 3, Peer Support - 1

Attribute 4, Access to Technology - 3

Attribute 5, Support of "Godfathers" - 1

Success Environment Measure – 7

Conclusion: low probability for success.

### **Potential Strategies**

If the use of the assessment instrument reveals a score of less than 15, as in the cases above, significant changes are called for.

Most successful unit managers will use the strategy of doing the same things with greater effort. Work longer hours. Write reports to prove worth of the program. Show money generated, budget outlays. Try to change the minds of higher administration. This type of strategy seldom works but it is usually the first one tried. Strategies that better address the real problem are shown below.

1. Start the process to change to an organization that would give your program a high priority.
2. Stop "tilting windmills". Seek another internal position where less effort is required. Consult or do research in the time available. See if it is possible to do less until retirement.
3. Seek to place the program in a more favorable portion of the current organization. There may be more entrepreneurial units in the organization that would welcome such a program.
4. Take early retirement if possible while attempting #1 above.
5. Above all, recognize the problem of why success has stalled and take some action. Do something.

### **JERRY WESTBROOK**

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