

The Appriser

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Organizational Development: Executive Leadership Doesn't Repeat!

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Without actually being a J.C. Penney insider one has no real knowledge of the rise and fall of Ron Johnson as CEO. Still, anyone who was mildly observant knew he came from Apple as its chief merchandiser to do at J.C. Penney what he accomplished for the Forbidden Fruit and its stores.

That is where the problem starts. Do you think it is over the top to say the problem always starts there? I'm starting to wonder. The oft-made mistake is the executive who thinks that simply repeating one's past success is a shortcut so they do not have to work the process. This mistake brings down many a star, having succeeding marvelously in one place and failing at the next.

Why? Because they repeated the solution instead of working the process from which it came.

At Apple, Mr. Johnson led the effort to figure out how to merchandise the products being developed by others. J.C. Penney was not the same at all. There was no computer product in development. There were no apps, no ecosystem, and no guru Steve Jobs at the center of it all. Rather than being responsible for one part of the enterprise as he was at Apple, Mr. Johnson was now responsible for it all. From this distance it appears that everyone expected him to repeat the solution in an entirely different environment and marketplace sector, and they fired him when it didn't work.

Newly hired executives frequently ask me what they need to do in their new role. Often they are people moving from for-profit to non-profit environments or the reverse. Sometimes they are simply moving to an organization in the same sector. My answer is the same each time. *Go as a student who needs to learn the context, the culture and the mission before you unpack your tools. If you think you already have the answers, then you have already failed. It is a process of figuring it out. Figuring it out is what you take from place to place and repeat and not much else.*

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