

EPISODE 18

SHOULD THE RIGHT PERSON BE IN THE RIGHT JOB?

Why Domain Knowledge, Competence, Accredited Firms and Opportunity Cost Matter

Estimated Reading Time: 7–8 minutes

Introduction

Would you allow a dentist to perform open-heart surgery?

Would you appoint a heart surgeon to repair your teeth?

Would you ask an accountant to command a specialised police operation?

Would you appoint an engineer as Chief Justice without the legal qualifications and judicial experience required for the office?

Most people would say no.

The reason is simple:

Different responsibilities require different knowledge, training and experience.

Yet when senior leaders are appointed to complex institutions, this basic principle is sometimes weakened. General leadership ability is treated as though it can replace deep knowledge of the institution's core work.

This episode asks whether societies lose valuable performance when the person leading an institution does not properly understand its principal discipline.

What Does “The Right Person” Mean?

The right person is not merely someone who is intelligent, honest or experienced.

The right person should possess the combination of competencies demanded by the position, including:

- relevant professional knowledge;
- practical experience in the institution's principal field;
- leadership ability;
- ethical judgement;
- strategic understanding;

- operational competence;
- the capacity to innovate and improve performance.

A highly competent person may still be the wrong person for a particular role.

A brilliant cardiologist may know little about structural engineering.

An accomplished lawyer may not understand electricity generation, transmission, grid stability, plant maintenance or the long-term engineering decisions required to lead a national power utility to its full potential.

Competence must therefore be judged **in relation to the job**.

Technical Institutions Require Technical Understanding

Some organisations are built around highly specialised disciplines.

Examples include:

- electricity utilities;
- railways;
- water systems;
- hospitals;
- airlines;
- mining companies;
- engineering organisations;
- police services;
- courts.

Leadership of these institutions involves more than financial administration or legal compliance.

The leader must understand the institution's core purpose.

At an electricity utility, the principal task is not merely to manage meetings, contracts and finances.

It is to generate, transmit and distribute reliable electricity safely, efficiently and sustainably.

Legal, financial and governance expertise remain important, but they support the institution's central technical purpose. They do not replace it.

Technical Contracts Require Competent Companies

The same principle applies when a public institution appoints a company rather than an individual.

An electricity utility should not appoint a pharmaceutical, trading or general business company to design or build a power station merely because that company promises to employ engineers after receiving the contract.

A municipality should not appoint a company with no established civil-engineering capability to design roads, water-treatment works, wastewater systems or structural infrastructure.

The contracting company itself should possess the professional capability, registrations, accreditations, systems and experienced personnel necessary to undertake the work.

A technically unsuitable company may recruit one engineer only after winning the contract. If that engineer leaves, the company may be left without the knowledge needed to complete, supervise or certify the work. The project can then stall, fail or require expensive correction—while the public carries the loss.

This is known as key-person dependency: the contract appears technically capable only because one individual temporarily supplies the competence that the company itself does not possess.

Before appointing a company for specialised work, the client should ordinarily verify:

- the company's core professional discipline and proven track record;
- its statutory registrations, professional certifications and sector accreditations;
- whether it has suitably registered professionals in permanent and meaningful roles;
- its technical systems, quality controls, equipment and organisational capacity;
- whether the tendered team will actually perform and remain accountable for the work;
- its ability to continue if a key employee leaves;
- the professional responsibility and liability attached to designs, supervision and certification.

The question is not simply whether a company can hire someone who knows the work. The question is whether the company itself is genuinely competent, professionally accountable and institutionally equipped to deliver the work from beginning to end.

The Opportunity-Cost Problem

An appointment may not be a complete failure and may still impose a serious cost.

Imagine that a properly qualified and experienced technical leader could take an institution to a performance level of **1,000 points**.

A capable leader from another discipline might take it to **800 points**.

The institution has not collapsed.

But society has lost **200 points of possible performance**.

That lost value is the opportunity cost.

It may appear as:

- electricity not generated;
- projects not completed;
- innovation not pursued;
- maintenance not properly understood;
- technical risks not identified early;
- institutional knowledge not developed;
- services not delivered to their full potential.

The question is therefore not only:

Can this person perform the job?

The more demanding question is:

Is this the person most capable of taking the institution to the highest level it can achieve?

The Case Study

Consider a national electricity utility.

Its decisions involve:

- generation technology;
- transmission networks;
- grid engineering;
- plant performance;
- maintenance planning;

- energy security;
- capital projects;
- environmental requirements;
- long-term technical innovation.

A lawyer may contribute essential legal expertise.

An accountant may contribute essential financial expertise.

A human-resources professional may contribute organisational expertise.

But OUBAS questions whether those supporting disciplines should ordinarily displace the principal technical discipline at the very top of a highly complex engineering organisation.

The same principle applies elsewhere.

A police service should ordinarily be led by someone who deeply understands policing.

A hospital's clinical direction requires medical expertise.

A court requires judicial and legal competence.

The profession at the institution's core should not become a secondary voice within its own organisation.

The Company-Appointment Case Study

Consider a municipality appointing a general business company to rehabilitate a major road.

The company has no established civil-engineering practice, no proven road-design capability and no permanent professionally registered engineer responsible for the work.

After receiving the contract, it hires one civil engineer. The engineer prepares initial work but later resigns. The company cannot properly continue the design, supervise construction or take professional responsibility for the outcome. Work stops, defects appear, costs increase and public money is lost.

The same risk arises when technically unsuitable companies are appointed for power stations, substations, water-treatment plants, wastewater works, bridges, hospitals or other specialised infrastructure.

A friendship, political connection, broad business reputation or willingness to subcontract cannot replace the professional capability required by the work.

Why This Matters

Public institutions affect millions of lives.

Wrong appointments can influence:

- electricity supply;
- public safety;
- healthcare;
- transport;
- water;
- justice;
- employment;
- national competitiveness.

Leadership appointments are therefore not merely employment decisions.

They are national development decisions.

Every percentage of unrealised institutional performance may translate into real losses for citizens and the economy.

OUBAS Analysis

OUBAS believes that leadership should begin with **fit for purpose**.

General management ability is valuable, but it cannot always substitute for deep domain knowledge.

Specialists understand the hidden relationships within their fields.

They recognise technical risks earlier.

They understand operational trade-offs.

They can challenge expert advice intelligently rather than merely receive it.

They are also better positioned to drive innovation because they understand both the present system and its technical possibilities.

OUBAS therefore supports a domain-led leadership model for highly specialised institutions.

Under this model:

- the principal leader should ordinarily possess substantial knowledge and experience in the institution's core discipline;
- other professions should form part of a strong multidisciplinary executive team;
- legal, financial and governance expertise should strengthen—not replace—the institution's technical leadership.

This is not an argument that every engineer can lead an engineering organisation.

The engineer must still possess integrity, strategic judgement and leadership capability.

The principle is that **leadership competence and domain competence should exist together.**

The same principle applies to contracted companies. Corporate competence cannot be created merely by placing one qualified employee inside an otherwise unqualified enterprise. The organisation receiving the contract must itself possess durable technical capacity, professional accountability and systems appropriate to the assignment.

OUBAS Principle

The greater the technical complexity of an institution, the greater the need for its leadership to understand the institution's core discipline.

A related principle follows:

A person may be competent in general and still be unsuitable for a particular office.

A further principle follows:

A company may be commercially successful in general and still be professionally unsuitable for a specialised technical contract.

And another:

Public institutions should appoint technically competent organisations—not merely intermediaries who intend to find technical competence after winning the work.

OUBAS Reform Proposal

OUBAS proposes that senior public appointments should be governed by transparent competency frameworks specifying:

- the institution's core professional discipline;

- minimum domain qualifications;
- relevant operational experience;
- leadership and ethical requirements;
- measurable performance obligations;
- continuing professional development;
- periodic independent performance reviews.

For specialised public contracts, transparent competency frameworks should also specify:

the professional discipline in which the company must be established;

mandatory company registrations, certificates and sector accreditations;

minimum permanent professional staffing and succession capacity;

relevant completed-project experience;

technical systems, quality assurance and professional-indemnity requirements;

restrictions on fronting, undisclosed subcontracting and dependency on one temporary expert;

verification that the tendered professionals remain assigned throughout delivery;

automatic review or suspension where the company loses the competence on which the award depended.

Where an institution is multidisciplinary, its executive structure should reflect that reality without weakening the authority of the profession central to its mandate.

Appointments should not ask only:

“Is this candidate acceptable?”

They should ask:

“Is this the best available candidate to take this institution to its full potential?”

Key Lessons

After reading this episode, you should understand that:

- competence must be assessed against the requirements of the position;

- highly technical institutions require leadership that understands their core discipline;
- general leadership ability does not always replace specialist knowledge;
- an appointment can be adequate and still impose a substantial opportunity cost;
- the right leader should combine domain expertise, integrity and leadership ability.

specialised contracts should be awarded to companies that possess institutional—not merely borrowed or temporary—technical competence.

OUBAS Knowledge Check

1. What does “fit for purpose” mean?

- ☐ Matching a person’s knowledge and experience to the requirements of the job.
- ☐ Appointing the most senior applicant.
- ☐ Selecting a person from any profession.
- ☐ Avoiding technical qualifications.

2. What is opportunity cost in this episode?

- ☐ The performance lost by choosing a less suitable appointment.
- ☐ The salary paid to a leader.
- ☐ The cost of advertising a vacancy.
- ☐ The cost of professional registration.

3. Does OUBAS argue that qualifications alone make someone a good leader?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

4. What should a public institution verify before awarding a specialised technical contract?

- ☐ The company's registrations, accreditations, track record, permanent professionals and technical capacity.
 - ☐ Only that the company promises to hire an expert later.
 - ☐ Only the company's general business experience.
 - ☐ Only the lowest tender price.
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5. Which combination best reflects the OUBAS position?

- ☐ Domain expertise, leadership, integrity and accountability.
 - ☐ Qualification alone.
 - ☐ Political loyalty alone.
 - ☐ General management alone.
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OUBAS Public Sentiment Survey

1. Should the head of a highly technical institution ordinarily have substantial experience in its core discipline?

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

2. Which factor should carry the greatest weight in senior institutional appointments?

- ☐ Relevant professional knowledge
- ☐ Practical experience
- ☐ Leadership ability
- ☐ Integrity
- ☐ A combination of all four

3. Do you believe unsuitable leadership appointments reduce institutional performance even where the institution continues operating?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

4. Should senior public appointments be assessed through published competency frameworks?

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

5. Should specialised public contracts be awarded only to companies that can demonstrate durable in-house professional competence, appropriate accreditation and proven sector experience?

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

6. Which institution or sector most urgently needs better alignment between professional expertise, leadership and contractor capability?

OUBAS Innovation Challenge

You have been asked to appoint the leader of a national electricity utility and to award a contract for construction of a new power station.

Create five compulsory requirements for the individual leader and five compulsory technical, professional and accreditation requirements for every company tendering for the project.

Share your competency framework with OUBAS.

Strong proposals may be considered in future **OUBAS Reform Papers** and by AAP multidisciplinary working groups.

Share Your Experience

Have you worked in an organisation where the leader deeply understood its core work?

What difference did that make?

Have you experienced the opposite?

Share what the organisation gained—or lost—because of the appointment.

Have you also seen a technically unsuitable company receive specialised work and then depend entirely on one employee or subcontractor? What happened when that competence was unavailable?

Your contribution will form part of the **OUBAS People's Index** on competence, leadership and institutional performance.

Continue Your Learning

 Visit the **OUBAS Bookstore** for publications on institutional leadership, engineering, governance, public administration, accountability and national development.

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The **Amalgamated African Professionals (AAP)** connects professionals who understand that Africa's institutions require both specialist knowledge and multidisciplinary cooperation.

Join engineers, doctors, lawyers, accountants, scientists, educators, entrepreneurs and public-sector professionals to:

- exchange expertise;
- develop competency frameworks;
- collaborate on projects;
- mentor emerging professionals;
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Every response contributes to the **OUBAS People's Index**, helping measure public views on competence, leadership and institutional performance.

Next Episode

Episode 19

What Must the State Deliver to the People?

Why does government exist?

What are public goods?

How should citizens measure whether the State is delivering electricity, water, roads, healthcare, education, security and other essential services?

OUBAS exists to educate, stimulate informed discussion and inspire practical solutions.

Knowledge grows when it is shared.

Institutions improve when people participate.

The only constant in every successful institution should be innovation and continuous improvement.

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