Putt's Law

Idea In Short

Do not treat Putt's Law as a mathematically proven rule of organizational design. It is a satirical observation about technical hierarchies, associated with the pseudonymous Archibald Putt, that captures a persistent tension inside engineering and scientific organizations. Those with the deepest understanding of the technology often remain close to the work, while those with the most formal authority over decisions may be farther from the technical substance. The concept became memorable because it compresses a recognizable pattern into a single line: authority and expertise do not always travel together. In fast-moving technical organizations, that gap can distort planning, weaken judgment, frustrate experts and produce leadership structures that are administratively powerful but operationally disconnected. The strategic value of Putt's Law lies in the warning it offers, not in the literalism of the satire

Putt's Law is one of the sharpest satirical descriptions of life inside technical hierarchies. Its appeal comes from how efficiently it names a common organizational tension: the people who understand the work often do not control it, while the people who control it often do not fully understand it. That is an exaggeration, but it is an exaggeration with explanatory power. Technical organizations repeatedly struggle with the gap between expertise and authority.

What Putt's Law says

Putt's Law is usually stated this way: technology is dominated by two types of people, those who understand what they do not manage and those who manage what they do not understand1. The formulation is associated with the pseudonymous Archibald Putt and was popularized in Putt's Law and the Successful Technocrat, first published in 1981 after earlier magazine articles in the 1970s2.

The statement is plainly satirical. But satire often survives because it captures a recurring structural pattern better than formal language does. Putt's Law works that way. It translates

a widespread technical-management frustration into one sentence.

What mismatch it highlights

The core issue is not simply that managers know less about the details than specialists. That is normal. The sharper critique is that formal authority can become detached from meaningful technical understanding. When that happens, managers may still allocate resources, set schedules, define priorities, or judge performance without adequately grasping the constraints of the systems they oversee.

Engineering leadership commentary often explains Putt's Law in exactly these terms: there is a persistent gap between deep technical understanding and managerial roles and that gap can create unrealistic expectations and demoralization among engineers3. The problem is therefore not hierarchy by itself. It is hierarchy without enough technical empathy.

That is why the law remains memorable in engineering cultures.

What Putt's Corollary adds

Putt's Corollary sharpens the satire further by claiming that every technical hierarchy, in time, develops a competence inversion. In other words, the technically strongest people remain closer to the actual technology, while those with less technical competence tend to move upward into management4. This is a more provocative claim than the law itself because it suggests the hierarchy may systematically separate technical knowledge from organizational power.

Whether or not one accepts the full exaggeration, the warning is clear. Promotion systems can reward visibility, administrative fluency and ambition more reliably than technical judgment. Over time, that can create an inversion between where expertise sits and where authority resides.

This is the failure mode many technical workers recognize immediately.

Why it resonates in technical organizations

Technical organizations are especially vulnerable to this tension because the work is hard to

evaluate from the outside. Software, engineering and scientific effort often involve uncertainty, hidden complexity and trade-offs that are not obvious to non-specialists. That creates room for leaders with weak technical grounding to overestimate simplicity, underestimate risk, or demand confidence where uncertainty is the honest answer.

Modern summaries of Putt's Law emphasize exactly these effects: leaders without domain understanding may set unrealistic deadlines, misjudge complexity, or create frustration for people closest to the technical reality5. The organization then becomes administratively tidy on paper but strategically clumsy in practice.

This is why the law is not merely an insult about managers. It is a warning about decision quality.

What the law does not mean

Putt's Law does not mean every manager must be the best engineer, nor that technical experts automatically make great leaders. Management is a distinct craft involving coordination, communication, trade-off judgment and institution-building. An organization can fail just as badly by romanticizing technical skill and neglecting leadership capability.

The real lesson is about alignment. Technical authority should be informed by enough technical understanding that decisions are credible and technical experts should have enough influence that reality can reach the decision-making layer. Review commentary on the book often notes its place among social satires of management structure rather than as a literal doctrine6.

So the right reading is diagnostic, not doctrinal.

What leaders should do

First, reduce the gap between decision rights and technical understanding. This does not require every manager to be a top specialist, but it does require enough domain fluency to interpret risk, complexity and trade-offs responsibly. Second, create paths for technical experts to influence major decisions without forcing all of them into formal management. Third, evaluate leadership not just by administrative control, but by how well leaders stay connected to operational truth.

Organizations also need promotion systems that do not equate ambition or presentation skill with judgment. Technical hierarchies perform better when authority is close enough to expertise that execution and strategy can inform each other.

The deeper lesson

Putt's Law endures because it says something many technical professionals have felt but struggle to express cleanly. When authority and expertise separate too far, organizations begin to look rational from above while feeling irrational from inside. Plans become cleaner than reality. Reporting becomes more confident than the work itself.

That is the practical lesson. Technical organizations do not fail only because they lack intelligence. They often fail because intelligence and authority are sitting in different rooms.

- 1Putt's Law And The Successful Technocrat
- 2Putt's Law And The Successful Technocrat Listing
- 3Putt's Law | Engineering Leadership Handbook
- 4Putt's Law Text Excerpt
- 5Putt's Law | Laws Of Software Engineering
- 6IEEE Review Note On Putt's Law And The Successful Technocrat

Summary

Putt's Law remains useful because many technical organizations still struggle to align power with understanding. Even when the formulation is deliberately cynical, it captures a real structural risk: the people closest to the technical truth may not control decisions, while the people making decisions may not fully understand the constraints, trade-offs and uncertainty of the systems they govern. This does not mean managers must be the best engineers, nor that hierarchy is inherently broken. It means technical leadership needs mechanisms that preserve technical empathy, credible judgment and proximity to reality. The practical lesson is straightforward. When authority and expertise drift too far apart, organizations become easier to manage administratively but harder to steer intelligently