



**Leading Clever People:  
*How do you manage people  
who don't want to be led and  
may be smarter than you***

Based on an article by Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones,  
[Harvard Business Review](#), March 2007, p.72-79

A close-up photograph of a green leaf with water droplets, serving as a background for the title. The leaf is the central focus, showing its intricate vein structure and the glistening surface of water droplets. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green, creating a natural and fresh atmosphere.

# Introduction

# “Clever People”

- Handful of staff whose ideas, knowledge and skills with the potential to produce disproportionate value from resources made available to them
- Leaders have to create an environment in which they can thrive



# Top Executives

- Recognize the importance of having extremely smart and creative people on staff
- Attracting clever people is only half the battle
- Must also foster an environment in which clever people are inspired to achieve their fullest potential

# Clever People

- One defining characteristic
- They don't want to be led
- Create problems for leaders
- More mobile in the age of globalization, with more opportunities

# Clever People

- Psychological relationship leaders have with them different from those they have with traditional followers
- Want a high degree of organizational protection and recognition that their ideas are important
- Demand the freedom to explore and fail
- Expect their leaders to be intellectually on their plane – but do not want a leader's talent and skills to outshine their own
- Share a number of defining characteristics





# Understanding Clever People

# Good News

- Clever people produce remarkable results on their own
- But need the organization as much as it needs them
- Cannot function effectively without the resources it provides – the classical musician needs an orchestra; the research scientist needs funding and the facilities of a first-class laboratory
- Clever people sources of great ideas but without systems and discipline deliver very little



# Bad News

- All resources and systems useless without clever people to make the most of them
- Know very well that you must employ them to get their knowledge and skills
- To capture knowledge embedded in clever people's minds and networks, a better knowledge-management system needed

# Attitudes of clever people towards organizations

- Reflect their sense of self-worth
- Scornful of the language of hierarchy
- Acutely aware of the salaries and bonuses attached to their work, often treat promotions with indifference or even contempt
- Cannot be lured or retained with fancy job titles and new responsibilities
- Want to stay close to the “real work”, often to the detriment of relationships with people they are managing



# Seven Things You Need to Know About Clever People

*Characteristics which collectively make  
them difficult to manage*



# 1. They know their worth

- Tacit skills closer to medieval guilds than to standardized, codifiable and communicable skills characterized by the Industrial Revolution
- Cannot transfer the knowledge without the people

## 2. They are organizationally savvy

- Find the organizational context in which their interests are generously funded
- If funding dries up have a couple of options:
  1. *Move on to places where resources plentiful,*
  2. *Dig in and engage in elaborate politics to advance pet projects*

### 3. They ignore organizational hierarchy

- Met with cold disdain if you seek to motivate them with titles or promotions
- They do care about status and very particular about it
- Insist on being called “doctor” or “professor”



## 4. They expect instant access

- If they do not get instant access to top management think organization do not take them seriously

## 5. They are well connected

- Plugged into highly developed knowledge networks
- *Who they know is as important as what they know*
- Networks increase their value to the organization
- Make them more of a flight risk

## 6. They have a low boredom threshold

- Will walk out the door if they are not engaged intellectually and inspired with organizational purpose



# 7. They won't thank you

- Unwilling to recognize your leadership
- Feel they don't need to be led
- Remain on the fringes of their radar



# Managing Organizational “Rain”

# Organizational “Rain”

- Associated rules and politics
- Clever people need to be protected from the “rain”
- Protection from “rain” necessary but not sufficient
- Also important to minimize the rain by making rules and norms simple and universally accepted – “representative rules”
- Savvy leaders streamline rules and promotes a culture that values simplicity



A close-up photograph of a vibrant green leaf with water droplets, serving as a background for the title. The leaf's veins are clearly visible, and the water droplets are scattered across its surface, adding a fresh and natural feel to the image.

# Letting a Million Flowers Bloom

# Organizations

- Whose success depends on clever people do not place all their bets on a single horse
- Value diversity and not afraid of failure
- Smart leaders help clever people live with their failures

# Establishing Credibility

A close-up photograph of a green leaf with water droplets, serving as a background for the title. The leaf is the central focus, with its veins and the texture of the water droplets clearly visible. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green, creating a natural and fresh atmosphere.



# Clever People

- Need to feel independent and special
- Equally important to make sure they recognize their *interdependence*
- *“You must help clever people realize that their cleverness doesn’t mean they can do other things.”*
- *They may overestimate their cleverness in other areas, so you must show that you are competent to help them.”*

# Leaders

- Must demonstrate that you are an expert in your own right
- Must possess expertise which is either supplementary (in the same field) or complementary (in a different field) to clever people
- Must exercise great care in displaying expertise so as not to demotivate their clever staff

# Avoiding ineffective leadership

- Identify and relate to an informed insider among your clever people willing to serve as an anthropologist – interpreting the culture and sympathizing with those who seek to understand it



# Reverse Psychology

- Used to lead clever people
- *“If you want them to turn right, tell them to turn left”*

# Managing Clever People

- If you try to push them, you will end up driving them away
- You need to be a benevolent guardian rather than traditional boss
- You need to create a safe environment for your clever staff
- Encourage them to experiment and play and even fail
- Quietly demonstrate your expertise and authority

# Cont'd

- You may sometime begrudge the time you devote to manage them
- But if you learn how to protect them and give them space they need to be productive, they will flourish