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
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 retain 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 they 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
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
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 a 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
• 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