



How to Lead and Harness the Potential of Clever People

Managing clever people is a topic that leaders find to be inherently difficult (and sometimes frustrating) mainly because clever people possess the self-knowledge that they don't really want to be managed. They are highly talented individuals with skills and knowledge 'passports' that contribute largely to their company's success [1]. Clever people want to be constantly stretched in their job role as their boredom threshold is extremely low – they thrive on autonomy and empowerment. This article explores how you as a leader can harness their potential as a 'Compassionate Guardian', and not the traditional 'boss' to get the best from your cleverest. This article also examines how to effectively manage clever people, overcoming the problems and challenges that this entails and provide workable strategies for implementation in the future.

"Clever people master life; the wise illuminate it and create fresh difficulties" Emil Nolde, German Expressionist Painter

Despite being a painter, a quote as well as a picture can **paint** a thousand words. Naturally, he was not relating this to 21st century business leadership, but there are words of wisdom here for both clever and wise direct reports and leaders in organisations.

Clever people **do** master life and work. But not **all** clever people are **wise**. This is where your forte as a leader comes into play. The 'wise' leader illuminates and harnesses this cleverness. Your "Compassionate Guardian" status also comes to the fore here, enabling the clever to **realise their potential** and deal with the 'fresh difficulties'; helping them to solve their problems or 'blockers' and to reach their work 'self-esteem' and self-actualisation' needs without them **feeling** that they're being managed [2]. Naguib Mahfouz also consolidates Emil Nolde's thinking for 'wise' leaders to remember.

"Clever is one thing, wise is another. Few people are both." [3]

That's where you as a leader can stay **one step ahead** of your clever direct reports. Wisdom is an under-rated leadership skill. Use this to your advantage. You will encounter clever people who are both, but as previously stated and quoted it is a very **rare gift**. If a leader possesses one or both characteristics, particularly wisdom then the clever people can be led much more effectively.

1. Leading Clever People Without Them Feeling That They Are Being 'Managed'

Clever people come in many different forms, due to the complexity of their role and organisation, or perhaps they are a subject matter expert in their field of expertise. They could be an academic expert in nuclear physics, a world-class IT developer that is one of the 'handful' of global people that possess specific skills and knowledge or the innovative inventor that comes up with moments of extreme genius.

Everyone is talented. Certainly not everyone is as talented or as clever as everyone else, but every clever individual has certain things they are excellent at, and certain development areas [4].

However, rating the talent in your clever people depends more on your leadership and communication skills (as opposed to creating performance and potential matrices), combined with a **soupcion of intuition** and **closely** observed behaviour. Skills and knowledge do differentiate clever people and have more quantitative measures such as quality, cost and time. However, it is also their behavioural application, e.g. innovation and problem-solving, that may be the differentiator between the clever people with similar skill and knowledge sets. It is how they do it, not just what they can do.

As clever people can form many different shapes and sizes, **what does it really mean to effectively lead and manage clever people?**

Leaders must create a collaborative, energised environment for their direct reports to survive as "clever people." Clever people, according to Goffee and Jones (2007):

"...have one defining characteristics; it is that they do not want to be led." [5]

This is clearly a **dilemma** for leaders. What clever people **do** seek is a high degree of **organisational protection**, recognition that **their ideas are important** and acted upon, the **freedom to explore possibilities**, problem-solve and make their own decisions, which will sometimes lead to failure. Therefore, make it **safe to fail**. Generally, with clever people, **there will be more successes than failures**. Your job is to facilitate and help the clever people deal with these failures. This will undoubtedly lead to future successes. According to Goffee and Jones clever people:

"...expect their leaders to be intellectually on their plane – but they do not want a leader's talent and skill to outshine their own." [5]

With regards to empowerment, Goffee and Jones cite an example from Swiss pharmaceutical giants Roche, which encourages its clever people in three of its associated companies to engage in different projects in the way that they wanted to pursue it.

CEO Franz Humer tells them:

"You do what you want [at Genentech], and we will do what we want at Roche, and in five years time, we will know. Sometimes you will be right, and sometimes we will be right". [5]

There is naturally more that they want than giving total empowerment to your clever direct reports. They may not want managed or led, but you, as their line manager, have to be that 'Compassionate Guardian', which means be there for them – **be present** [6], **motivate** them, provide the necessary **support and guidance**; and use the different **styles of leadership** for the right situation i.e. Situational Leadership [7].

2. The Problems and Challenges of Leading Clever People

There are issues and challenges of effectively leading clever people. Adapted from Goffee & Jones (2007). Scott Berkun (2004 & 2005) [8] and from other leaders' experiences, the following problems arise from leading clever people:

- They don't want to be led. They want to be coached, developed and **realise their potential**.
- They often **believe** that they can do your job better than you; and given the right development and succession planning this is often the case, but **not every** clever person has leadership traits and behaviours.
- They don't care about their job titles, adding the word Senior just isn't enough.
- They have a **low boredom threshold** and can often become impatient.
- They don't like mundane tasks; they want '**stretch**' projects.
- **Promotions** don't **motivate** them and they **ignore** organisational hierarchy.
- They do not want the boss to **take the credit** for their work efforts.
- They know their worth to the business and can sometimes leverage this to create an 'ivory tower' of knowledge.
- They are **business savvy** and know what makes the organisation **tick**.
- They have **strong networks** across the business and expect **instant access**, even to the CEO.
- They **won't thank you**, even when you are leading when well.
- They want to be **visible**; they are **stars** that want to **shine**.
- They like to be right and sometimes will **defend ideas to the death** rather than admit they're wrong. They use the Critical Parent to Adapted Child **crossed transaction** and are one of the games clever people **play**. [9]

Do not think that this list is exhaustive; there are many other factors but the ones listed are the primary ones from research sources and leaders' experiences.

3. Transparent & 'Invisible' Leadership Strategies for Clever People

We are dealing with clever people here; so there's a degree of subtlety as to how to provide solutions for leading clever people – hence some will be transparent to them and perceived as '**Compassionate Guardian**' behaviour and some will be **invisible**, what you can do **behind the scenes**. So, what are some of the strategies that can be employed for leading your clever people?

- **Stars need to shine!** Leaders have visibility to the higher echelons of the organisation and it's up to the manager to distribute some of that visibility down to their clever direct reports. When one of your clever people complete a **high exposure** task with tremendous results, make sure that your peers and leader know who completed the work. **Make people visible**.
- Clever people will **repay** you for your generosity many times over with their **trust**. As clever people often care more about their ideas than anything else, if they can't trust you with them, they're **unlikely** to trust you with anything else.
- Demonstrate to your clever and talented people that you **recognise** this and **communicate** this to them.
- Through careful application, regularly asking them what they need from you can create an **enormous act of respect**. You are putting them, temporarily, on an even playing field with you.
- The leader has to make conversations **open and positive**, without getting defensive or giving them reason not to disclose the information you're asking for. This also means accepting feedback on how you manage. This starts with an informal discussion. Generally, the leader should say **little about their own opinions**. The leader's job is to listen, help clarify the other person's thoughts and then go away and think about what they said.
- Great leaders should be easily seen as **coaches**, who value the different roles, and try to bring together the right kind of **chemistry** to make good things happen with their clever people.
- Prevent clever people from defending their bad ideas; effective leaders have **to use their speed in thought** to overpower others. Your best defence starts by breaking an argument down into pieces. When they say "it's obvious we need to do X." You say, "Hold on. You're way ahead of me. For me to follow I need to break this down into smaller chunks." Don't ask for permission, just go ahead and do so.

Summary

Your clever people should be given challenges. Clever direct reports usually have a different DNA [10]. They want to think and solve problems to make things work better. So you've got to deal with them differently. Take the time and invest in your best. Limit bureaucratic constraints – ask yourself if it's necessary for your clever people if their time is, for example, better invested on their biggest challenges.

Finally, don't try to 'dumb-down' clever people. They won't tolerate it. So the leader has to role-model all of the behaviours that you want to see in them – clever, engaged and creative. Remember, **a dead battery can't be changed with a dead battery**.

[1] Jonas Ridderstralle & Kjell Nordstrom, *Karaoke Capitalism*, Bookhouse Publishing (2004). This book describes the 'war of the talented' in the 21st century.

[2] The terms 'self-esteem' and 'self-actualisation' are derived from Abraham Maslow, 'A Theory of Human Motivation', *Psychological Review* (1943), including his observations of humans' innate curiosity and needs up to self-esteem and the 'ultimate-high' of self-actualisation.

[3] Naguib Mahfouz, [Egyptian novelist](#) (Winner - 1988 [Nobel Prize for Literature](#)).

[4] <http://www.scottberkun.com/essays/28-how-to-manage-smart-people/>. Scott Berkun (2004).

[5] Rob Goffee & Gareth Jones, *Leading Great People* Harvard Business Review (March 2007).

[6] Stephen C. Lundin, Harry Paul, John Christensen, and Stephen C Lundin Harry Paul & John Christensen, *Fish!: A Remarkable Way to Boost Morale and Improve Results*, Hodder & Stoughton (2002).

[7] Spencer Johnson and Kenneth H. Blanchard, *The One Minute Manager*, Berkley Trade (2000).

[8] <http://www.scottberkun.com/essays/40-why-smart-people-defend-bad-ideas/>. Scott Berkun (2005).

[9] Information on transactional analysis can be found in Eric Byrne, *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*, Barnes & Noble (1973).

[10] <http://abcnews.go.com/Business/CareerManagement/story?id=3777340>