



## Performance Management

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### Here Come the Clevers!

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Most organizations have people who make a disproportionate contribution to what they do. They habitually punch above their weight, though exactly who they are and what they do varies greatly according to context.

We have labeled such talented workers “clever people”\* or “clevers.” In the United States, being clever carries connotations of being overly smart and difficult. But we prefer the English interpretation being skilled and talented with an acceptance that being smart usually comes with a few rough edges that can cause problems. Our research revealed that clever people often don’t want to be leaders, and they say they don’t want to be led. But they are much more productive when they are led in a distinctive way.

Once, leadership was about planting a flag on the summit and anticipating plaudits. Now the leader paces anxiously at base camp waiting to hear good news. Leaders can no longer be the sole driving force for progress. They are not the ones who lead the charge up the mountain. Rather, they must identify talented people with the potential to reach the summit, connect them with others and help them get there.

For example, think of software programmers who create a new piece of code or pharmaceutical researchers who create a new drug that can potentially bankroll the entire organization for a decade. Or think of investment bankers or tax advisers who find a tax-efficient way to structure a merger deal, or marketing executives who see patterns in consumer spending that no one else can detect and spot a new market category.

One can find value-creating brilliance in a huge variety of places, including schools, hospitals, fast-moving consumer goods businesses and retail outlets, not just in R&D departments. Clever people can hold any type of job.

Consider Will Wright. Intensely, energetically intelligent, Wright is regarded as one of the pioneers and greatest talents in the computer-gaming world. He is the man behind the original “SimCity,” which spawned an entire series of “Sims” games, allowing players to create their own simulated towns, homes and families. The computer game, originally launched in 1989, is an urban planner’s dream. It allows gamers to create their own 3-D cities and manage their growth and prosperity. For the city to flourish and grow, the player must manage its finances, environment and quality of life.

“SimCity” was an instant hit for California-based Maxis, a subsidiary of Electronic Arts (EA). It has generated a host of spinoffs. The “Sims” series has now sold many millions of copies.

During Wright’s time at Electronic Arts (before leaving last year) he created enormous amounts of value for his organization. The “Sims” products have earned millions of dollars for the company, and the brand franchise is worth many millions more.

Despite his enormous personal contribution to the bottom line, and in spite of the fact that he needs the support and infrastructure that EA provides, Wright’s primary affiliation is not with organizations but with the project or cause. “You say Electronic Arts, but to me that doesn’t have much meaning,” he said. His own startup, Stupid Fun Club, is jointly owned with EA. Yet, Wright needs organizations. Like most clever people, he creates value from the resources,

networks, teams and sheer marketing muscle that companies can provide. This is highly significant. Clever people have symbiotic relationships with organizations.

To lead clever people effectively, talent managers have to do a number of things well. First, it is best to understand their key characteristics. Not recognizing these may cause stumbles at the first hurdle.

Not every clever person has all of the following characteristics, but they share many.

- They know their worth; their skills are not easily replicated.
- They ask difficult questions.
- They are organizationally savvy.
- They are not impressed by corporate hierarchy.
- They expect instant access to decision makers.
- They are well connected outside of the organization.
- Their passion is for what they do, not who they work for.
- Even if you lead them well, they won't thank you.

### **What Can Leaders Do?**

There are rules talent leaders can use to guide clever people.

#### **Explain and persuade.**

Clever people do not like to be told what to do (and are likely to react badly if they are. It is as if this undermines their sense of self esteem) clever people shouldn't need telling.

#### **Use expertise.**

Hierarchy still exists. There are CEOs, CFOs, CIOs, department heads and so on. But using hierarchy to justify decisions or behavior is dangerous and probably self-defeating. Clevers will respond far better to expert power than to hierarchical power.

Tell them what (but not how). While grand visions may be a distraction, a sense of direction that unifies efforts is helpful. But going beyond what should be done to how it should be done is risky because it deprives clever people of the challenge of working things out for themselves.

#### **Provide boundaries.**

Clevers need space. They also need structure and discipline. Creating the right sort of space (sufficiently large to allow them to express themselves, but with boundaries that help them focus their efforts) is vital. One without the other is dangerous and ultimately unproductive. Talent leaders often find themselves in the structuring role but sometimes go too far and kill creativity.

#### **Give them time for questioning.**

An age-old instruction to children is to ask if they don't know something. Sadly, this advice often has been ignored in businesses. Rob Murray, CEO of Australian brewing company Lion Nathan, said, "Some people in the business avoid dialogue and engagement with the clevers because they feel intellectually intimidated. So the No. 1 rule is, even if you realize as a CEO [that] you're talking to people who are academically more astute than you are, you've got to be prepared to go in there and engage them."

#### **Give recognition and amplify achievements.**

What clever people do is central to their identity (so recognizing their achievements is vital). However, they tend to value recognition from prestigious peers and clients outside their organizations the most. Further, given their sensitivities to interference and the fact that many



may be working on long and complex tasks with unknowable outcomes, recognition is highly valued, but it does not necessarily need to be delivered frequently.

**Encourage failure and maximize learning.**

Whereas many organizations need to train people intensively to reduce the risks of failure, clever people often arrive highly trained in professional or technical terms. Paradoxically, they may get cleverer mainly by organizations maximizing opportunities for failure. This is because they tend to respond best to difficult, stretching tasks where their talents are pushed to the limits. By contrast, their attitude toward training events, particularly managerially inspired ones, can be scornful.

**Protect them from the rain.**

Clever people see the administrative machinery of the organization as a distraction from their key value-adding activities. They need to be protected from the organizational “rain.” Leading clevers is all about removing obstacles that prevent them from doing what they do best. Sometimes, that means knocking down the barriers; other times it means keeping the red tape at bay.

**Talk straight.**

In order to flourish, leaders must be confident about their own expertise. If they are not, the clevers will sense it. They have good antennae for corporate speak.

Provide real-world challenges with constraints. Individuals can be energized to achieve goals by leaders encouraging them to believe that everything is possible, but this kind of optimism is not always successful with clever people. Their preference seems to be the reverse. Tell them something is not possible, and they will be highly motivated to prove you wrong. Clever people are at their most productive when faced with real, hard questions that they must solve within meaningful constraints.

Create a galaxy. While it is conventional wisdom to attract stars to an organization, the real leadership task is to ensure these stars are connected to each other in ways that influence the organization. Allow the best players on the team to set the standards for everyone.

Conduct and connect. Clevers don’t like leaders who hog the limelight. Instead, the leader’s task becomes how to conduct and connect.

It can appear that life in organizations full of clever people is a little hard (inhabited by difficult and unpredictable divas, with under pressure leaders battling to create order from a rising tide of chaos). Not so, at least not always. When leaders truly unleash the power of clever individuals and teams, the results can be stunning.

The Will Wrights of the world may seem like exotic creatures, but they can be found in any organization. Our collective task is to identify and tap the creative potential of clever people and clever teams.

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