

How to lead clever people

By Sarah O' Carroll

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CLEVER PEOPLE in organisations need a special type of leadership, according to Professor Rob Goffee, an expert in organisational behaviour from London Business School.

Speaking recently at a lecture in the Australian School of Business, Professor Goffee presented research on culture and leadership and what it takes to effectively lead this generation of 'clever people'. As these people can often be difficult to manage, leaders should therefore be aware of the characteristics and traits possessed by their top employees.

Because of their resourcefulness, tacit knowledge base and good connections, employees who create disproportionate amounts of value from the limited means made available to them are extremely important according to Professor Goffee. These clever individuals also know their worth, have a low boredom threshold, are organisationally savvy and are unwilling to recognise leadership by thanking their bosses.

"How you lead these 'clever' people represents an increasingly significant challenge in the knowledge economy," says Professor Goffee.

However, scepticism of company hierarchy and administration processes can work against organisation strategy, and Professor Goffee argues that clever people should therefore be sheltered from 'organisational rain', or the rules and politics associated with big-budget activity.

"Clever people see an organisation's administrative machinery as a distraction from their key value-adding activities. When leaders get this right, they can establish exactly the productive relationship with clever people that they want," he says.

He also says the aptitude and confidence exhibited by some clever people belies their need for reassurance and behind-the-scenes strategic direction.

"If you try to push your clever people, you will end up driving them away. As many leaders of highly creative people have learned, you need to be a benevolent guardian rather than a traditional boss," he said.

Therefore managers within an organisation must acknowledge these clever people capabilities straight away, otherwise you'll be "dead in the water" according to Professor Goffee. As they also don't want to be led, and don't always want to recognise leadership it is important for managers to take a directional role, keeping rules simple and being accessible.

However, in spite of all this it is also important to help them recognise that they don't know everything and leaders should be aware that these people need the organisation as much as the organisation needs them.

"It's also equally important to make sure that clever people recognise their interdependence: you and other people in the organisation can do things that they cannot," he added.

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