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### Leading Clever People

Key ideas from the [Harvard Business Review](#) article By Rob Goffee, Gareth Jones

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#### The Idea in Brief

Who *most* determines your company's success? **Clever people** — employees whose knowledge and skills enable them to produce disproportionate value for your firm. Think the pharmaceutical researcher who formulates a new drug, or the programmer who creates a new piece of code. Their single innovation may bankroll their entire organization for a decade.

To make sure clever people do their best work at your company, you must harness their talents. But that isn't easy: Clever people don't want to be led. They don't care about titles or promotions. And they're easily bored.

What to do? Goffee and Jones suggest leading this crew differently. Be a benevolent guardian, not a traditional boss — by protecting them from complex rules and politics. Create a safe environment where they can experiment — and fail. Respect their expertise while quietly demonstrating your own.

Lead your clever people the *right way*, and you unleash their full potential. They *and* your organization win.

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#### The Idea in Practice

To get the most from your clever people, understand what makes them different. Unlike typical employees, they:

- Know their worth
- Know how to get funding for pet projects
- Expect instant access to higher-ups
- Are plugged into extensive knowledge networks
- Won't thank you for leading them well

To increase clever people's value — and prevent attrition:

**Reduce administrative distractions.** Protect clever people from rules and politics associated with big-budget activities. For example, at a newspaper, the editor lets an investigative reporter skip editorial meetings. In a big consumer goods company, a leader filters requests for information from the head office so a consumer profiler can experiment with a new marketing plan.

**Maintain diversity of ideas.** Avoid centralized management structures that stifle innovative thinking.

Swiss pharmaceutical giant Roche encourages the clever people in its three companies to pursue different projects as they see fit. 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.”

**Make it safe to fail.** Effective leaders know that for every successful product, many will fail. Ideally, the successes will more than recover the costs of the failures. By helping your clever people live with their failures, you boost the chances of more successes.

When three of Glaxo’s high-tech antibiotics all failed in the final stages of clinical trial, chairman Sir Richard Sykes sent letters to the team leaders. He thanked them for their hard work but also their decision to kill the drugs. He then encouraged them to move on to the next challenge.

**Let clever people pursue private efforts.** These efforts may generate new business opportunities for your firm.

Google lets employees spend one day a week on Googlettes — their own start-up ideas. Result? Innovation at a speed that puts large bureaucratic organizations to shame. For instance, the Google-affiliated social networking Web site Orkut began as a Googlette.

**Demonstrate you’re an expert in your own right.** Show how your expertise complements or supports your clever people’s expertise. You’ll establish credibility with them.

A marketing director at a brewer knew little about traditional brewing techniques. But he could quote details about his company’s sales performance. His clear mastery of the business side gave him authority and credibility, so brewers respected his product development opinions.

- [Purchase the full-length Harvard Business Review article here.](#)
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Further Reading

Article

**How to Kill Creativity**

*Harvard Business Review*

May 2000

by Teresa M. Amabile

When it comes to managing creative people, it's just as important to know what *not* to do as what to do. Creativity gets killed much more often than it gets supported. The problem isn't that managers smother creativity intentionally — it's that the business need for coordination and control that can inadvertently undermine employees' ability to put existing ideas together in new and useful ways.

How to avoid stifling your people's creative talents? Balance coordination and control with creativity-nurturing practices. For example, help employees broaden their expertise — their technical, procedural, and intellectual knowledge. The broader their expertise, the larger the intellectual space they have to explore and solve problems. And fire up their intrinsic motivation — their abiding interest in certain activities or deep love of particular challenges. Guidelines for stimulating intrinsic motivation include matching people in diverse work teams, telling them the company's goals but letting them figure out how to achieve them, allocating sufficient time and other resources to projects, and letting creative people know that what they do matters.

## About the Authors

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