



Box clever and keep your star performers happy

By Stefan Stern

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Something else to worry about. When business is bad, your best people get twitchy. They struggle. They start looking around for something better to do. "Clever, creative people want to go to work and have fun," says Gareth Jones, a fellow of the centre for management development at London Business School (LBS). "They don't like gloomy workplaces."

We have heard enough for one lifetime about the "war for talent". But this doesn't mean that leaders can ignore who is on their team. Last week I went to a seminar hosted by the Corporate Research Forum which, thankfully, injected new life into that increasingly tired debate over talent, knowledge workers and the rest of it. It is time to reframe this debate. What we should be thinking about, you see, are clever people.

Clever is a slippery word. It is never a good idea to be thought "too clever by half". Many people are told at some stage in their lives that "you are not as clever as you think you are".

But clever people are important. They create "disproportionate value", in the words of the aforementioned Prof Jones and his colleague, Rob Goffee, who is a professor of organisational behaviour, also at LBS.

The Jones/Goffee double act might be familiar to readers of these pages. Their first big hit came more than 10 years ago with *The character of a corporation*, an insightful analysis of corporate culture. They followed up a few years later with the provocatively titled *Why should anyone be led by you?*, an original (and subversive) book on leadership.

This year they will publish *Clever - leading your smartest, most creative people*, and last week's seminar, run by the authors, offered a chance to sample some of the ideas that are explored at greater length in the new book.

Who are these clever people? They work in research and development for pharmaceutical businesses, they develop new computer games for software companies, they are partners (or rising stars) in professional service firms, they are mechanics and designers in Formula One racing teams. But clever people are not all earning huge sums of money in the private sector. Some are also working in intensive care in children's hospitals, or curating special exhibitions in museums.

What are they like, and why are clever people difficult to lead and manage? Having researched the subject, Profs Jones and Goffee have come up with a 10-point check list for managers.

1. Cleverness is central to their identity. They take negative feedback badly.
2. Their skills are not easily replicated. Not many people can do what they do.
3. They know their worth.
4. They ask difficult questions.
5. They are organisationally savvy. Their projects will get funded.



6. They are not impressed by corporate hierarchy. Job titles don't mean much to them, but status does.
7. They expect instant access to the chief executive. If they don't get it they may lose interest, slipping rapidly from obsession in their work to indifference.
8. They are well connected both inside and outside the organisation.
9. They have a low boredom threshold.
10. They won't thank you. They do not feel they need to be led.

But there is also good (and slightly less daunting) news for business leaders. Clever people need organisations. Their work usually involves complex tasks that are performed in a team setting. They want "a high degree of organisational protection", Goffee and Jones say. And they are more effective when they are well led.

Who is good at leading clever people? Sir Martin Sorrell, chief executive of the global marketing services group WPP, gets the professorial thumbs up. He has to deal with a lot of powerful creatives. In conversation with the authors he plays down the big impact he makes on his colleagues: "I'm a boring little micro-managing, number-crunching accountant."

Too modest. In reality, Sir Martin constantly reminds his people that he is running a creative *business*. WPP's boss enforces commercial discipline, offering the tough love of a benevolent guardian. He also uses reverse psychology: "If you want them to turn left, tell them to turn right."

Do we risk over-estimating the importance of cleverness at work? Famously, the clever people at Enron were "the smartest guys in the room".

Fred Hilmer, now vice-chancellor of the University of New South Wales in Australia but previously a McKinsey partner, business school dean and CEO of the Fairfax media group, says that, while you need some clever people, organisations with lots of them can go wrong fast. The global banking crisis would seem to bear this out.

Still, you need to hold on to your cleverest people, especially at a time like this. Try to create the right amount (neither too much nor too little) of sociability and solidarity within your organisation.

Where do clever people flourish? "In complicated value chains, where there is plenty of 'unarticulated reciprocity'," Prof Goffee explains. Build a culture that is hard to copy, and which will give you a significant competitive advantage.

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