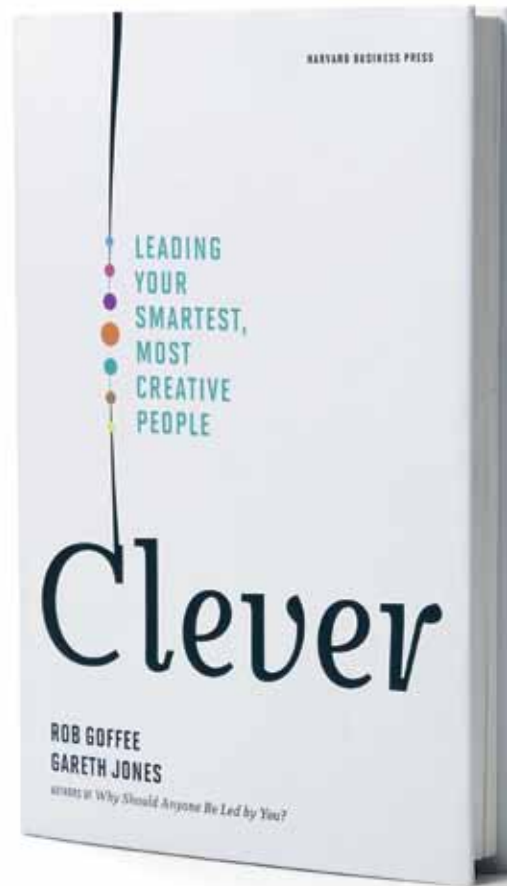


Mobilizing Cleverness

“Clever,” by Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones (Harvard Business Publishing, 2009)

The experts Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones say organizations must nurture clever people. But what about the rest of us?



A According to the authors of *Clever* (Harvard Business Publishing, 2009), the industrial economy of the 20th century is being replaced by the “clever” economy of the 21st century, and businesses that want to be at the forefront of their industries have to learn to bring out the best in the “clever” people they employ.

That can be done, according to the authors, Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones, by allowing what they call “clevers” a large degree of freedom, but not too much; by praising their accomplishments; by putting them under the direction of people whom they respect; by surrounding them with other clever people; by imposing a limited number of rules that make sense to them; by giving them direction without being overly prescriptive; by encouraging risk taking, but not too much; by allowing mistakes, but not too many; and by framing their work so that it has moral purpose.

The problem with the authors’ argument is that they never clearly define clever people or clever economy. At the outset, the authors, who are organizational experts affiliated with the London Business School, characterize clever people as “highly talented individuals with the potential to create disproportionate amounts of value from the resources that the organization makes available to them.” They then describe Will Wright, the creator of the electronic game *SimCity*, as an example of the quintessential

clever person. By giving prominence to Wright, who is portrayed as an exceptional thinker, the reader is led to believe clever people are a small subset of the population.

But, as the book progresses, and other examples of clever people are given, the reader is led to believe that clever people constitute a much larger group. For example, by Chapter 3, the authors seem to be saying that anyone who serves on a corporate board is, necessarily, a clever person, as are all doctors, lawyers, accountants and academics.

Is it being churlish to gripe about a vague definition? To this reader, the definition seems highly important. If the authors are talking about a small group, the implication is that a large majority of employees should not be treated as the authors suggest clever people should be. Following this line of reasoning, it is inconsequential if a vast majority of employees labor in jobs in which they are harshly punished for their mistakes, the boundaries of their tasks are rigidly defined and they are not encouraged to stretch to the limits of their abilities, they must obediently follow the dictates of leadership even if it lacks vision or moral purpose, and the quality of their colleagues is immaterial.

If, on the other hand, the group that the authors are discussing is much broader, then many more employees would come under the umbrella of those whose creativity should be nurtured, whose egos should be stroked, who should be led by people who have earned their respect, and whose work is meaningful.

Despite the omission of a clear definition of clever people, the book serves a useful purpose by providing a sound prescription for how to foster creativity in employees. By taking the measures that they prescribe, the authors write, organizations and their leaders can get the best out of clever people by ensuring that they receive recognition and by talking to them candidly.

The greatest shortcoming in their prescription is its failure to explain how managers should deal with prima donnas, a personality type the authors say is common among clever people.


In some passages, the authors suggest that organizations should indulge clever people's arrogance for the sake of getting

the benefits of what they have to offer. For example, the authors relate an anecdote from a hospital medical director, without comment, leading the reader to conclude that this is the authors' answer to the question of how to deal with the frequently swollen egos of clevers: "Do I tolerate the cardiac surgeon who occasionally lobs his toys out the pram and is a complete pain in the ass because he's a fantastic cardiac surgeon? Or do I say, We wouldn't let a staff nurse on Ward 22 behave like that; therefore, we're not going to let you behave like that? And my attitude is, I forgive them more than I forgive other people, but, in the process of doing so, every so often I remind them of this."

Elsewhere, the authors seem to say that one of the most important tasks of managers of clever people is to keep their self-regard in check because if they do not, the clever people are likely to destroy the organization. At one point, the authors describe the team efforts of an engineering consulting company to create the Water Cube, the aquatic center at the Beijing Olympic Games, "inspired by the natural formation of soap bubbles." The authors conclude: "Free of prima donnas, teams can achieve almost anything. Otherwise, they are likely to find themselves blowing bubbles."

In still other passages, the authors imply that managers need to be tough, but they do not say how this toughness should be exercised. In Chapter 2, for example, the authors quote a leader of clever people as if to suggest that this leader is an example to follow: "Clevers need to know where the limits are. Otherwise, there will be anarchy, and that is not good for anyone." But, the only strategy the authors suggest for keeping stars in check and preventing them from becoming intolerable is to recruit a number of them.

In discussing "clever teams," another coinage that is not clearly defined, the authors again raise the issue of arrogance and provide a few more details as to how it might be addressed.

Even with its gaps, "Clever" can be a useful prompt for deliberations about how to get the best out of employees, whether or not you consider all of them or just some of them clever. 

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