

MANAGING <sup>SMART</sup> PEOPLE  
- review -

How to manage smart people  
- review -

## I

One of the books I recently read taught me one important lesson on perspective vision. If you take it *literally* it may sound like I'm interested in *drawing*. If you don't *just take it*, you'll find out I'm actually interested in *outlining* the main features of what leadership and management is about.

A leader is more than an individual with leading responsibilities. That is just a boss. A leader is characterially synonymous with a very large palette of behavioral typologies, attitudinal positioning and cognitive reinforcement of the “boss-man” responsibilities.

[The bible on leadership](#)<sup>1</sup> is, first and foremost, as a title, a very nice pun: the author talks about various styles of leadership, skills and case studies, that seem to be scattered all over the

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1 Woolfe, Lorin, *The Bible on Leadership: from Moses to Matthew: management for contemporary leaders*, ISBN 0-8144-0682-3

Bible. The Bible, as the author says, “is also the greatest collection of leadership case studies ever written, with tremendously useful and insightful lessons for today's leaders and managers”.

I admit I never fully understood nor read the Bible. But that sentence alone is so convincing in its own, I may even dare say that, from a manager's point of view, the lessons of the prophets are pretty much the archetypal stereotypes one has in their head about what true leadership is about.



“Managers have more to do with enabling the happiness and productivity of the people that work for them than anyone else in the organization. The manager automatically takes on more responsibility for the career of their employee than anyone else in the organization or company.

They might ignore this responsibility, or do a

crappy job of it, but the responsibility is still theirs.” (Scott Berkun, *How to manage smart people*, download [here](#) full pdf)

In my view, leadership is the *working principle* of the organization. It has been said that the people, the executive department and working labor may be its engine. Well, to continue this idea, we can think of the leader as the working principle according to which the engine is built and, also **is functional**. Some organizations may work using the principles of *basic physics* (*physical force, efficient mechanics*), others use natural fuel and resources (*retailing, reselling*); few may use *electro-magnetics* and others may just rely on *brainpower*. All those concepts should be taken metaphorically. Also, all those metaphors are incorporated in the corporate *vision* that the leader has to stay faithful to, if he wants to succeed.

That is why when the boss makes the right choice in hiring people and succeeds in managing them, he can be considered a leader.



I find it odd that corporate management has suffered a sort of artificial intervention and now the management *per se* is split in multiple ramifications, among which we can find human resources management, as if managing people is something that the true leader of the organization does not have to be bothered with.

Of course, when an organization grows and to the point that it can be seen as a corporate organization, transcending boundaries, the true leader may not have lived long enough to care for his employees all around the world. HR management is something that he does not deal with because it exceeds his human capacity of information processing: he cannot work with all that data that people has been “transformed” in. He only chooses people and delegates them to deal with all that “data”.

I shall mention here that I would never delegate someone who didn't “grow” within the

organization to “manage” my people. The HR Manager, to me, *must* have been in the organization for a very long time, apart from the fact that he *must* have studied in this field.

I am going to talk about the management in a medium-to-small size organization, which, anyway, I consider more active, more alive and innovating than huge or large organizations.

#### IV

“He (the leader) chose people who were self-motivated and confident enough that he didn't have to expend much energy figuring out how to get them to work hard. But from my experience, this open management style is the only way to have a *best idea wins* kind of culture.” (Scott Berkun)

I was talking about this book, *The bible on Management*, so I'd like to continue with this quasi-mystical and academical variation of a Economics and Management issue. The “chosen one” could be, under the leader's

influence, the next prophet of the organization. If he is the “chosen one” his skills and qualities will show in a short period of time and would make him shine like the flaming bush in front of Moses. If he is the chosen one he, nonetheless, will NOT need to be managed (i. e. he will NOT need a *boss*), but he would need a *leader*, so that his creative force would be channeled towards the *main goal: achieve and bring to realization the corporate vision*.

Scott Berkun is talking about *how to manage smart people* from the point of view of the leader who dealt with smart people in his organization and who himself had had various experiences with different styles of leadership. That is quite a comprehensive point of view and is, and what he wrote is pretty much all you need to read on that subject because it's concise, witty and it does give you the straight answer. And you know why? Because *there is NO straight answer*. That much I learnt until now, that to every question, there is an answer but there will never be a *straight answer*.

And when it comes to managing smart people, there will be a lot of questions, high quality questions that the manager should deal with in a non-bossy yet constructive way.

When it comes to problems and questions, you need to experience it, you need to be there. If you read some solution, it's just a phrasal understanding that you get. But when you're about finding a solution, that's the straight answer: when you do things.

## V

“Everyone is talented. Certainly not everyone is as talented as everyone else, but every individual has certain things they are good at, and certain things they suck at. Good managers must step back from the hierarchy, bureaucracy, and formalization, and actually see people not just for what they do, but for what they can do that they currently are not doing.” (Scott Berkun)

That is not necessarily about seeing *through*

*people*, nor it is about *reading between the lines*. It's more about giving people the credit for what they are about to do. Some things take allot of time, some people need some time to do those things. Some very smart people are very fragile: like the bonsai trees, you need to be very nurturing to them, to see them grow in ways that you desire and are most appealing for you, as a manager. I believe that smart people are also fragile because they think too much... (they obviously do think allot)... but they become vulnerable because they grasp the essence of those things that the majority of people take for granted: they know and understand more about relationships, organizations, labor, development, economics, about what their job is and what they should do... than any other employee.

Some managers might play in a faulty way: they may feel threatened by smart people who work for them, so they fail to communicate their expectations to them in a constructive way. One of the sentences I LOVED in Scott Berkun's book was "What do you need from me in order

to kick ass on this project?”. That is what a good manager should ask the people in his team before running a project. This question raises other questions and reveals answers about not only what one should do to complete a task in the best way possible, but also about what the manager should do for the team.

Berkun further explains:

Its a cut to the chase, where you, as manager, lay out on the table the magic wish list of possibilities, and ask them to put their cards on the table. If a good discussion ensues, you then have the opportunity to actually deliver some of the things they might need. All the pet complaints they've been harboring have a chance to surface, and perhaps, simply fade away in the face of your brutal honesty and openness as a manager.” (Scott Berkun)

He adds:

“When people see that somehow you're able to cultivate and grow smart people, you win more

acclaim than if you presented the ideas yourself. I think if good ideas are in abundance, and the culture promotes and rewards their creation, there's much less competition for credit for it. (...) Asking them what they need from you is an enormous act of respect.”

I have had experiences with various types of managers, bosses and leaders. To this day I have not yet found that special combination of leadership traits and human quality that a person should have in order to become a role model. I currently work for somebody who is very close to that ideal profile and I hope I shall not be disappointed. I am 22 years old and I'd really love to have a true role model in my career. I prefer to be disappointed later in life, when I will be able to learn from what disappointed me, before I slip into a latent state of sadness.

## VI

The manager has all the authority and that is a very important fact because it impacts to a

great extent the state of mind of the employee. When the manager speaks, there is either an absolute agreement with him or a subversive, tacit negative reaction to it. And I believe *that* has more to do with the *leadership style* than with the idea that the leader had expressed.

As I noticed, a great leader has exceptional communication skills: I'm talking about Luther-King, about Kennedy, Gandhi, more recently Sara Palin and Obama, about Seth Godin and Ben Stein, Richard Dawkins and Jesus. (Sir R. Dawkins, please excuse the association, Jesus might have been real, that was just an example).

If you want to be a good manager with smart people and not only, you need to have at least half of those communication skills that these people mentioned above have.

## VII

“If you are a manager, it's unlikely that you were born that way. For awhile, you probably

had the job that one of the people who work for you currently has. You used to be more specialized, and have a well-defined expertise. This means that your natural bias will be towards over-involving yourself in that role, and under-involving yourself in the other roles people play on your team.

Another solution is this: First acknowledge that you have weaknesses, both in skills and in knowledge. Second, admit that your ignorance hurts not only the product, but the team itself.” (Scott Berkun)

It is hard to ascertain the good strategies from the bad, but working strategies, in leadership. Some may teach you to be a sort of democratic leader, that is a player, a team co-worker and coordinator. That is, to me, a BAD but WORKING solution. It's about resisting the cup of fine wine from the royal table. If you are a leader, if you are a king in your company, then act like it. You have to be “up there” and you have to wear a charismatic mantle all the time. But you have to be careful when you do that: do

not be afraid to be close to your people, caring and inspirational.

You don't have to be a father. It doesn't suit the contemporary trend of selfishness and individualism. But you can be a friend and a role-model. And that, along with staying truthful to your corporate vision, may very well be *the straight answer* that, I was saying before, does not exist. ;)

## VIII

You don't need something more to get something more. A lot of things, life included, is emergent, therefore the human mind is emergent from neurobiology and a lot of incidents. There is nothing supernatural to it, as some people may ask. (Murray Gell-Mann)  
You just have to be very constant, symmetrical and elegantly simple to get exceptionally beautiful and effective results.

Leadership is the art of giving people a platform for spreading ideas that work. If you want them

to work for you, you need to allow them deliver the best results, in time, and acknowledge that your best strength as a manager IS THAT YOU HAVE SMARTER PEOPLE THAN YOU IN YOUR TEAM.

KATCHJA