Leading Geeks

How to manage and lead people who deliver Technology

In today's business environment, many organizations are becoming technology led, and 'geeks' drive technology. The author describes 'geeks' as those people who research, develop, design, test, install and support technology. The book challenges the assumption that there is a 'one-size fits all' approach to leadership. Instead he recognises the value of cultural difference, and his focus is on the pervading culture that is often associated with technology based workplaces.

On Geek Stereotypes

 "Geeks are different from other people. If this comes as a shocking statement to you, you're either oblivious or unusually charitable with your opinions about others. But let's face it. Stereotypes exist for a reason, and although they can be cruel and insensitive, they often contain a kernel of truth."

On Rationality

"Geeks revere the rational. The irony is that their boundless faith in reason is fired by passion, a conviction so strong that it can only be based in emotion…the inherently irrational."

On the Geek View of the World

"For geeks, the mental tool that organizes almost every situation is the 'problem-solution' model. When confronted with almost any solution, the initial response is to seek out the problem and then find the solution. That's why geeks almost universally despise status meetings. These meetings don't conform to the 'problem-solution' model of work. They can't be clearly identified as solving a particular problem, so they must be a waste."

On Judging Others

"Geeks generally don't suffer fools gladly. First impressions count—a lot. Once a geek has decided that someone is a bozo, they tend to build barriers to communication, collaboration, and even to code. They will protect themselves and their work from the influence of the bozo."

On Resistance to Authority

"Geeks are notoriously resistant to authority bestowed from outside and generally reject official hierarchies. They tend to build their own, based on those values that they hold dear: knowledge and meritocracy."

On Money and Fairness

"Geeks are generally not captivated by money. Their attitudes toward money are much more tied up in their strong sense of fairness and justice. Everyone wants to feel fairly compensated for their value. The passion for reason combines with a strong belief in meritocracy to create an atmosphere where money is a primary measure of the value that one delivers to the organization."

On Rebelliousness

"Although most geeks are relatively timid and quiet people, scratch the surface and you will find a strong rebellious streak. This rebel image touches on many concepts that geeks hold dear, including freedom, independence, self-determination, integrity, and creativity. What may seem like an insignificant request for conformity, such as a request that a geek wear a coat and tie to a client meeting, can be met with what seems disproportionate and impassioned response. Repeated disregard of this sensibility can easily result in a mutiny."

On the Geek Leader's Role

"To a geek, the word 'control' conjures images of a remote control for a television or stereo. Being controlled is not something that geeks typically aspire to. On the other hand, 'coordination' is quite different. A leader who focuses on coordinating activities is more concerned with ensuring smooth information flow, recognizing and satisfying interdependencies, overcoming obstacles, and assisting each person to fulfil individual goals. Geeks welcome coordination while they resist control."

On Measuring Merit

"Because they tend to see the world through technology-coloured glasses, geeks often believe that the only valid criteria on which merit should be measured is technical knowledge. Not productivity. Not managerial skills. Not communication skills. When promotions, bonuses, or awards are bestowed on those who excel at things geeks devalue, they feel the organization has violated its commitment to meritocracy, and are outraged.

On Organizing Technical Work

"The organisation of geekwork is not dictated by the physical layout of a plant, the flow of materials through a process, or even by the customer interface. Geekwork is structured not by what you know about the nature of the work, but

by two key factors: what you don't know about the work and the specialized knowledge required to figure out what you don't know."

On Organizing Technical Work into Projects

"What is it that makes projects such a productive approach to geek work? There is a special interaction that takes place, a synergy between geek personalities, the character of geek work, and the nature of projects that makes them ideally suited to one another. All my travels have convinced me that projects are the optimal format for geek work."

On Ambiguity

"The problem-solution thinking pattern so common among geeks reminds us that geek work is all about ambiguity. Problems are mysteries that we do not yet know a solution to. Even discovering the right problems to address is a mystery. When a project starts, the team members don't really know what they are going to do, what questions they are going to be expected to answer, what experiments they are going to have to do. If you fail to understand the fundamental ambiguity of geek work, you will have a very hard time organising work productively."

On Motivating Groups of Geeks

"It may seem obvious, but the most important way to help a team build intrinsic motivation is to pick people who want to be on the team in the first place. Since you can't imbue geeks with internally-generated enthusiasm, select for it. There are many other factors that must be considered, but initial interest in the technology, the business, or a role on a project should be one of the primary considerations when making assignments."

On Project Teams

"Project teams are much less tolerant of non-contributing members than are people engaged in other forms of work organisation. When a team believes in its goals, is truly focused on completion, and believes that deadlines are real, participants have few excuses for allowing limited project resources to be squandered on poor performers. The foxhole-type loyalty that team members develop for each other prevents them from allowing their comrades to become victims of incompetent or incapable co-workers."

Summary
Understanding business culture is a prerequisite for successful dealings with that culture. Different businesses, departments, teams and in particular professions have varying cultures. Understanding the technology culture is becoming increasingly important. If you lead or manage technological specialists or even if you have cause to influence within a technology based environment, then I would recommend that you but this Book!