

## Leading Professionals:

### The Challenge of Managing Experts

*When managers try managing experts who are brighter than they are, it can often end in tears. The trouble is, that challenge is only just beginning.*

Today's workers are the most educated and professional in history - and the trend is accelerating. New professions such as risk management and occupational health and safety seem to emerge overnight, driven by scientific

discoveries, complex customer relationships, outsourcing and legislative requirements. Managers find themselves leading people who are

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smarter and better qualified in their area of expertise than they are. Many may have completed a qualification that did not even exist a decade ago.

Older professions such as law and medicine continue to splinter into finer degrees of specialisation, while many of the jobs that employed our grandparents for the whole of their working lives no longer exist. In addition, the jobs of the future have yet to be created.

The problem is we simply do not know much about how to lead these large and growing pools of intellectual assets. Organisations are now highly exposed to the whims of the talented individuals

they employ. One or two top people choosing to behave illegally, or a high-powered team jumping ship, can bring a company to its knees.

Employees have changed but organisations have not. The industrial-manufacturing era organisation consisted of a small, elite group of professionals who headed up a much larger workforce of trade and clerical staff, and "unskilled" workers. Each of these groups could be dealt with en masse via award payment systems, or latterly through enterprise wide employment agreements. Nowadays a similar small leadership group seeks to manage a workforce that is often at least as gifted as they are and whose primary tool of trade is deep specialist knowledge. The new professional workforce is idiosyncratic, demands individual treatment, responds only to leaders that they can respect, and requires new organisational structures of a kind we have not invented yet.

Professionals are ego and achievement driven; they thrive on assignments that allow them to learn and grow professionally. Their workplaces are in constant flux and can be highly unpredictable; job descriptions date rapidly. Yet people-management practices still assume defined job boundaries and static interests and don't recognise the degree to which key professionals drive the success of the business.

Professionals seek out autonomy and work most effectively within broadly defined boundaries rather than under explicit rules. Stretch targets and new assignments within system-side guiding principles

are motivating for professionals; close supervision and step-by-step tasks are not.

Professionals may find structural and/or organisational uncertainty unsettling. Uncertainty breeds disengagement and disengagement lowers productivity. Professionals like to be consulted on change. But they will often give an opinion without being willing to back their view with follow-up actions that disrupt their own work focus. Managing them requires broad consultation and quick decisions.

Many professionals value the status they hold in their profession more than their status in the employing organisations. As a result, managers who threaten or cajole professionals are often ignored, undermined or ridiculed. Top professionals may simply resign if they are unhappy as they can always get a new job. Effective managers work with professionals as colleagues, recognising their need for status and seeking to balance the tension between encouraging healthy egos and meeting organisational goals.

Professionals are paid to specialise; the more they know about a unique area, the greater their status and marketability. It can thus be very difficult - and even unproductive - to try to interest them in strategic or compliance issues outside their zone of interest. Professionals have three key assets available to them; their knowledge/expertise; the systems and processes they have developed to leverage that knowledge on problems that they can solve; and their professional reputation in the marketplace. They have to be engaged on the

basis that their involvement in an issue will contribute to growing their own asset base in one or more of these three areas. Alternatively, or in addition, they can be persuaded that they will have more time to develop their assets.

There are no simple solutions to these challenges, but I would offer some observations.

First, many industries continue to experience pressure on profit margins which translate to downward salary pressure. Professionals cannot remain quarantined from this, and thus will have to be cognisant of forces such as customer service and sales performance. The high fixed costs of professional companies will drive creativity and rationalisation - and hopefully in that order.

Second, managers are going to have to find new and ongoing ways of structuring work so as to deal with the tensions of working with a professional workforce.

Finally, leaders will have to get to know their people better - to learn to hold deeper, more purposeful conversations with their staff about the basics. They will have to help staff to make meaning out of their lives and to articulate the part they want work to play. These "mini-contacts" will be short lived, often undocumented, highly individual, situational, volatile, and hopefully ethical. That is increasingly the way the professional workplace seems to function best and the first movers have been quick to learn and adapt.

*This Article by Philip Pogson first appeared in Boss Magazine, October 2003*