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PIQUING GEEKS

MOTIVATING THIS CREATIVE AND UNIQUE GROUP OF WORKERS POSES A GREAT CHALLENGE

By Cecil Johnson
Knight Ridder

Geeks as a rule are just not rah-rah people. Management consultant Paul Glen, a card-carrying geek himself, underscores that morsel of common knowledge in the "Nurturing Motivation" chapter of his uncommonly insightful and readable book, "Leading Geeks."

Glen offers the example of a hypothetical motivational sales meeting. He describes a room charged with electricity, where the speaker has 300 highly paid, extroverted salespeople on their feet and engaged in a call-and-response about competition, challenge, success and winning.

Everyone is having a great time and vowing to go out and sell, sell, sell.

"But the geeks you brought aren't on their feet," Glen writes. "They aren't screaming back to the speaker. At first, they sit in the back, pondering the scene, mesmerized. Then someone starts sniggering and giggling. Eyes start to roll, and the judgment is in."

Geeks, Glen suggests, are incapable of believing that anyone could be persuaded to do anything in that manner, and they are "appalled that the objects of their disdain probably make more money than they do."

Learning how to motivate geeks, Glen writes, is the first of the four responsibilities of those who would be leaders of geeks. "It can't be done in the traditional manner," he writes. "You've got to help geek groups get motivated in a way that's compatible with their personalities and the constraints of geek work."

Glen says the other three primary responsibilities of leaders of geeks are:

- To facilitate the flow of ideas and activities, in contrast to the traditional command-and-control approach.

- To furnish external representation, i.e., to buffer geek groups from the outside world.

- To manage the structural and environmental ambiguity of the geeks' work situation.

Back to motivation. Glen differentiates between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The former refers to things people are motivated to do for enjoyment, interest or self-expression, to satisfy curiosity or to respond to a personal challenge. The latter refers to things done to achieve some goal or reward apart from the work itself.

In the traditional management model, Glen points out, the emphasis is on extrinsic motivators such as money, time off, promotion and recognition. But that doesn't always work for geeks because you are seeking

to encourage creativity in their case and not just behavior.

"If a geek is uninterested in a problem, even massive incentives, such as potentially high-value stock options, cannot make the problem interesting," Glen writes. "Even if the geek agrees to work on an uninteresting problem with only the hope of attaining a grand reward, don't expect stellar work."

But there is one extrinsic motivator that almost always works on geeks. "Never underestimate the power of free food," Glen writes. "I can't offer any rational explanation, but for geeks, even those making sizable incomes, free food offers major support to motivation development."

Glen emphasizes that the free eats should be dispensed intermittently. "If you always have free food around, it seems to lose its motivating value," he writes. "Geeks start to view it as a fundamental human right rather than a motivational perk."

That last observation speaks volumes about geek attitudes and behavior.

Glen dwells at length on how geeks differ from other workers and how they came to be that way.

"Geeks are different from other people," he writes.

He describes geeks as pampered introverts with a passion for reason and problem solving, who tend to view the world and other people in rather stark terms such as either brilliant or dumb, based upon their standard. Moreover, they generally are rebels who eschew such things as dress codes and hierarchical, power-based leadership.

They also can come across as excessively blunt and insensitive. Glen tells the story of a geek technical consultant assigned to evaluate the new network system

a potential client had installed. At the sales meeting, the chief technical officer of the would-be client company asked the geek consultant what he thought of the new system. The geek replied:

"Well, you've got Windows NT 3.51 installed in a number of your systems. Only an idiot would put that in."

A hush descended upon the meeting because the geek had insulted both the client's system and that company's technical officer. The consulting company obviously didn't get the job, but the geek thought the meeting went well.

Because geeks are so indispensable to the world of work today and will be even more so in the coming years, "Leading Geeks" is must reading for managers and others who work with this special breed of creative artists.

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— PAUL GLEN, AUTHOR

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