

eLeadership – Leading IT Professionals to Drive Results

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In today's eEnvironment, managing highly skilled IT professionals demand a whole new set of leadership skills. Leadership is ultimately about creating way for people to contribute to making something extraordinary happen. Leaders provide the environment in such a way that people are motivated to perform extraordinary things. However, the traditional Leadership practices are not sufficient to lead today's IT professionals for results. The specific challenges in IT area have created a requirement of new leadership qualities when leading IT professionals. By eLeadership, we mean a leader who can successfully handle the challenges faced by leaders in the IT industry.

Being knowledge workers, IT professionals identify profession rather than organizations. They drive themselves with their primarily by the pride of accomplishments. Keeping their knowledge up to date with latest technology developments is another passion for them. Also they are highly mobile and will make quick decisions to change their jobs at any given time.

Since IT professional's goals and incentives are different, managing them creates new challenges. It is not practical to lead knowledge workers by commanding them or by using laid down policies and rules. To lead knowledge workers effectively and to gain productivity using their potentials, one needs a good understanding

of what knowledge workers do and what drives or motivates them most. If we're serious about making IT professionals more productive we have to focus on their specific jobs and also the particular individual.

The key issues discussed in the paper are, special tasks of IT professionals, how to motivate them, challenges in leading for performance and productivity and new leadership know-how to lead IT teams.

1. What is eLeadership?

If you are a manager in an IT company or a manager of an IT department, you will probably wonder if there is any magic formula to obtain the high results from your professionals and retain top talents in your area.

In today's business environment, the only way an eleader can be effective is to adapt a dynamically balanced leadership style. Leaders who are leading IT professionals to drive results should imagine the future rather than try to predict it. It is a challenge in this fast-paced world of eBusiness to build a special culture that appreciates the individual commitment and values. IT professionals who are star performers and remain with the company long term are looking for leaders who understand their situation and interests.

Is there any effective formula to inspire IT professionals to do extra ordinary things? Effectively managing knowledge workers requires that the leader understand their background, capabilities and their motivational needs. Today in any environment Leadership requires a paradigm shift from top down hierarchical structure to lateral leadership. eLeadership requires further paradigm shift. Retaining highly skilled IT professionals requires a proactive approach.

Most organizations have the notion that by offering a better compensation package IT workers will be motivated to perform better. For IT professionals, they want job fulfilment and to feel valued more than the pay package. IT workers are one of the most mobile categories of workers today. They have the privilege of leaving their current employers without looking back because they are confident that there are other better opportunities waiting for them. This specific nature of their work makes their goals and incentives different and therefore creates a new set of management challenges.

We need leaders who have the capability to take care of IT workforce by building a working environment that satisfies their needs and maximize performances and simultaneously looking to the future needs of the company.

2. Special Tasks of IT Professionals

2.1 Nature of the Work

IT professionals work in a challenging environment. What makes IT professionals different from other professions?. They are a set of knowledge workers with high degree of education and specialized in technical areas. Their work is based on knowledge, problem solving, analysis and design. Primarily their passion is for their profession

that involves many technical tasks. That means they are first loyal to their profession, the technical area that they have specialized in.

With today's organizations more and more dependency on IT, the staff at IT have to work under pressure to meet target dates. IT professionals prefer to learn and experiment with new techniques and methods. This they do even at the cost of the target dates. Further they have to keep their knowledge up to date to cope up with the rapid technological changes in IT.

The complexity of today's systems needs the interaction of various components of hardware, software and middleware. Back end data bases, business logic layers, application layers, application interfaces, user interfaces, web services are some of the examples. In IT there is no one person expertise in all these areas. It is the contribution of team of experts in various areas that produces effective systems. Team work plays a vital role in IT projects. IT professionals always have to work as teams and it is important that they maintain a healthy relationship with other IT experts.

2.2 Organization Structure

In most companies IT operates as any other department in the organization. The structure of the IT department is determined by the structure of the whole organization. The traditional organizational structure and practices are unlikely to be successful for an IT department with knowledge workers.

There is a clear relationship between the organizational structure and the way which the organization performs and behaves. What is required is a structure that compliments the work of IT professionals. This structure should encourage the specific culture required in the IT division.

3. Motivating Knowledge Workers

Motivating knowledge workers is difficult and requires applying new leadership skills. Most of the time the knowledge workers do not respond positively to the motivational steps taken by organizations. For example salary increases, stock options, personal holidays, bonuses have short term or no impact on motivation. It is a known fact that people become motivated if are exited about the purpose of the organization and how they can contribute towards achieving it. Do IT professionals really care about the purpose of the organization? They have a passion for their profession rather than work place. Irrespective of the profession, every employee expects recognition and praise. In case of IT professionals this is very high. Leaders have to recognize, reward and express their appreciation far beyond the limits of the organization's formal procedure. In order to motivate and influence IT workers one should consider the fact that they are unique.

To motivate IT professionals, we need to recognize what they need, want and inspire to. To analyse and explain we use the obvious 'hierarchy of needs' defined by Abraham Maslow (1908-1970). In case of IT professionals their physiological and safety needs are already met or not driven by those needs. What applicable for most of them are the upper three levels namely Social needs or Belongings, Esteem and Self Actualisation. It is in these areas that leaders can influence their IT workers to achieve results.

Social Need or Belongings–The need for companionship of the IT workers is high. This is encouraged by building teams and empowering the team members with authority and responsibility. While accepting the team concept the leader should as well as respect the individualism. Further IT workers appreciate the opportunity to interact with

people in the same profession in other organizations and professional bodies.

Esteem – The esteem needs of self respect, achievement, attention, recognition and reputation are vital for IT professionals. Respect is the fundamental requirement to build trust and relationship. The leaders should respect the staff, their knowledge, and their profession and recognize good performances. Leaders should provide clear directions, constructive feedback and encouragement.

Self Actualisation–This is the need of IT workers to realize fully the potentialities of their talents and capabilities. The manager should provide the employee a challenge and the opportunity to reach their full career. This has an impact on allocation of resources. IT professionals are concerned on their rights to be in the correct job or task. These are technical tasks that they prefer or they are good at. The leader or manager who allocates such an individual in a different task may be doing so to the detriment of that person's need. For example a Software developer involved in a creative development work will hate to be involved in routine software maintenance work.

4. Challenges in Leading for Performance and Productivity

Leading IT professionals for performance and productivity requires understanding of the characteristics and style of IT professionals. As a subset of the company, IT departments are influenced by the structure and the culture of the whole corporation. eLeaders are faced with the challenge of operating a structure within a structure and creating a culture within a culture. While supporting the business to achieve its goals, the leader should acknowledge the specific culture needed to drive the IT professionals to achieve the results. An effective leader is

capable to create this specific environment required to motivate the staff and obtain the maximum performance without creating any conflicts to the whole organizational structure and culture.

IT managers are responsible to deliver systems on time, within budget at right quality. To achieve these objectives they have to impose various controls such as progress reporting, performance measurements on their staff. Being knowledge workers IT professionals enjoy more autonomy and do not like to be told what to do. In such an environment IT professionals consider the tasks such as providing feed back, prepare progress reports as an additional burden on them. In one organization the introduction of weekly progress reports was considered as a threat by the IT staff.

Are IT workers concerned about target dates and cost overruns? How to make IT professionals accountable for what they do? This can be achieved by making them a part of the project. Knowledge workers want to give their inputs and opinions as part of the decision-making process. They should be given a chance to involve in decisions on the target dates, which technical environment to use etc. This is the participative approach or subordinate-centered leadership style.

How can the leader create the right environment? It is not enough the leaders to understand what drives or motivates IT professionals. It is also important to understand what de-motivates them. Some of the organizational procedures are not compatible with IT professionals. For example they do not want to be on the clock and want flexible hours. Most organizations simply introduce one big repository for all knowledge and other workers, and do not look closely how knowledge workers do their work.

How to recognize and appreciate the work of IT professionals? For IT professionals more money is not the preferred recognition. It is eLeaders responsibility to fill this gap, by finding the ways of appreciation that suit most for IT workers. It is important to find ways to recognize individual contribution as well as teamwork. This can be in the form of recognizing them in the presence of others or catch them doing exceptional performance and recognize them immediately.

Providing opportunities to be creative is another challenge. IT professionals have a passion for technological tasks. Provide opportunities to IT professionals to try out new things in latest technology. Encourage them to subscribe to technical journals, attend workshops and seminars and network with professionals in other organizations. The real challenge for the leader here is how to provide these facilities with a limited budget.

5. New Leadership Know-how to lead your Team

Credibility is the foundation of leadership that makes a difference. Leaders must led by example. Leaders are supposed to be role models for their organizations. Being a role model they will be able to influence the activities of others individually or as a group. Do your IT professionals constantly watching you and take your lead to improve their enthusiasm? If not there is a gap between you and your team that indicates your followers have not given you the leadership power. To be an effective eLeader one must carefully develop those leadership qualities that appeal to the IT professional psyche. It is important that the IT team feels that their manager too is a part of their team.

There are anti-leadership arguments on the impact on leadership on outcomes of IT workers. As a traditional leader how well

you perform will be restricted by external conditions such as market demand for IT profession, high expectation of users and unrealistic expectations of top management. Some argue that IT workers are self motivated due to technical environment they work on. Also being professionals they are well aware of the expectations of the organization and may not need leadership to inspire them. In reality this is not the case. Today experienced managers are needed more than ever to support and facilitate IT workers to achieve results. If not properly lead, their performances will not be channelled to achieve the objectives of the organization.

It is not the leader's personality that impact the IT performance but the organization culture. This is where the requirement of eLeadership arises to fill the gap of organization culture and IT culture. While making IT to support the business the eLeader has to inspire the IT professionals to perform for results. The eLeader should be fully aware of the expectations of the organization as a business and the expectations of IT professionals as knowledge workers.

6. Conclusion

IT professionals are special group of intelligent and technologically literate people. Leading them for results requires new set of skills that we referred in the paper as eLeadership. The working environment and attitudes of IT workers today have changed drastically. The manager's perception of what IT workers want differs from what they really want. Leaders should understand their capabilities, needs, vision and create an environment within their organization that motivates them to produce the desired results.

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