High Tech Management & Leadership

What makes a great manager or leader in a High-Tech company? Is it great technical knowledge or skill? Or is it the ability to be affable and convince people to do what you want by the strength of likeability and personal relationships? Getting people to perform by fear of and grudging respect that comes from being in a position of power? People might answer this question in almost as many ways as there are people to ask.

I've had many influences in my career that have shaped my attitude toward management and leadership. I started my career in old-line, traditional, top-down industrial companies in the Midwest. Not knowing any better at the time, I thought that taking orders and doing what you're told was the normal course of business.

This doesn't lead to much initiative or critical thinking, but I guess there wasn't much asked for or expected of an entry-level employee in old-line companies. Speak when spoken to do what you're told, was the leadership style of the day.

It wasn't until I moved into High Tech and went to work for Hewlett Packard that a whole new world was opened to me. You care what I think? You want me to take the lead on that issue and make a decision that will very likely be approved if it's deemed important enough to even be reviewed?

What a revelation that was the idea of treating employees like valued adults, with spare brainpower that might contribute to the company's success. The HP way opened my mind to the power of enabling people, and pushing decisions down as far as practical in the organization where best knowledge about the situation often resides.

To this day I'm in awe of the effect of a few basic principles at HP respect for the individual, hire the best you can find in a methodical and comprehensive manner with cultural fit being a major factor, fire slowly, push decisions down in the organization, keep organizations small, and senior executives are just people too no pedestals.

People felt like they were working in a small company in which they were important owners because of these policies and had incredibly loyalty as a result. Even though HP was already an $8B multi-national corporation.

Like any company, the HP culture and leadership wasn't perfect, and some of the warts have likely contributed to the recent malaise the company has found itself in in recent years. But the simple policies above elevated HP to incredible success over some 60 years it's too bad this great company has strayed and lost its way a bit lately.

Another area that I believe is incredibly important in the management and leadership of software and high-tech companies is work ethic. Our business moves too fast to sit still for very long.

The top people in the company set the tone here. In my experience, if the top people aren't obviously sweating to contribute, it is really apparent to the troops. When the CEO is taking home several hundred thousand dollars (or millions) and seems to be doing it by just enjoying the good life, it sends a very chilling message down the ladder what is valued, what it takes to get ahead, and "get some for yourself" while you can. Not the best way to build a team-oriented, winning culture.

I was struck by a ride that I had from the airport in a taxi this week. The cabbie was an immigrant from Eritrea in east central Africa. His country has been war-torn and plagued by military coups and corruption. He came to the US with little more than the clothes on his back, with a wife and two small children. Spoke no English.

He originally worked in a car wash, one of the lowest jobs in the US food chain. Learned English and Spanish at the same time, because he had too. Now he owns his own Cab, and has 4 kids. Still works hard he picked me up at 11PM and had been working since 7AM that morning. But he doesn't complain at all.

He is appreciative that he could come here, and loves this country. His two daughters just got accepted to UCLA. It's a classic American tale like many of our families that immigrated to this country over time. And you know what? To me, that taxi driver is a real leader. I'm sure that his children look up to him, and are appreciative that his hard work has paved the way to a better life for them.

I'm certain that they are very loyal and will do whatever they can to gain his approval and fulfill his expectations for them. He has set a tremendous example for the people he is responsible for one of selflessness, a gritty work ethic and never-say-die attitude. A strong Tech company CEO or senior executive can set a great example with much the same attitudes and qualities.

So, to sum it up, what makes great leadership in High Tech? I think it's someone with great intellectual capacity, but also great empathy for people as well. It's someone with his ego in check enough to hire good people and let them create with the ability to push the envelope and fail without getting fired. Someone who sets an example of hard work, intellectual honesty and tireless work ethic.

A manager who realizes the power of giving credit to subordinates, rather than taking it for him or herself. One who realizes the short-term profits are very important, but that people should not be treated as a simple expense like an office chair if you want to have long term profits as well. Great leadership builds great companies for the long term. It's very rare. If you know of one, I'd love to hear about him or her. Let me know what you think.