

Published in the *IEEE Engineering Management Society Newsletter*, Q2 2006.

Leading Geeks

How to Manage and Lead People Who Deliver Technology

by Paul Glen, published by Jossey-Bass, 2003

Book review by Sue Dorward

I have a bad habit of skipping to the end. That's what I did with this book, not intending to read the full 250 pages (who has time?) but still wanting to get the bottom line. And here it is: technology people have their own way of doing things, and anyone who hopes to lead them needs to understand them, earn their respect by sharing and evolving the lore of how the organization came to be and the vision for where it's going, and earn their trust over time by consistently walking the talk. But as if watching over my shoulder, Glen explains that he kept these points for last so that the reader does not put the cart before the horse. He warns that "if you start out to build trust and respect so that you can be an effective leader, you're unlikely to get it... Things can be especially tough for leaders without a technical background, since geeks place high value on technical prowess as a qualification for leadership."

The main audience for this book seems to be the non-technical leader who is having or expects to have a rough time of it. As a techie myself, I was a bit skeptical that further reading (from the beginning this time!) would make me feel like the technical world I cut my teeth in was inside a fishbowl, with the reader peering in to look at the odd lifeforms inside. Yet, that's not what happened. I read Glen's chapters on Geeks, Groups of Geeks, and Geekwork, and consistently said to myself, "Yes, that's right, that's how it is. I do that. We did that. Though I guess I never really took a good look at it before." It was an unexpected and valuable exercise in self-awareness, one of the key elements of emotional intelligence, which I can't help but notice some of us geeks could use more of.

Glen explains geek culture, the informal tech hierarchy (and its associated "machismo"-based jockeying for position), the true nature of technical work and why it is necessarily difficult to manage and control, and key competencies for geeks to develop over their careers. With this foundation laid, he then goes deep with a chapter on each of the geek leader's main responsibilities: *provide internal facilitation, manage ambiguity, furnish external representation, and nurture motivation.*

The content is well-organized and clear, making it a good read and also easy to skim for material that matches your interests and immediate needs. I particularly like Glen's use of a few key lists, which he consolidates as a reference in the back along with an extensive list of his favorite books and articles, grouped by topic. Here is a sampling:

- Technical work is organized by what you *don't* know.
- Geeks know more (technically, at least) than their managers do, which is problematic for traditional, top-down management.
- As geeks develop their careers, they should strive to move beyond technical competence and team management to developing abilities to play positive politics, make others productive, and manage ambiguity and timelines.
- To motivate geeks, manage the meaning and communicate the significance of their work, create carefully chosen and balanced project teams and then encourage their isolation, *control* resource availability, and offer free food (intermittently!).
- To demotivate geeks, monitor them excessively, exclude them from decision-making, and give and then change artificial deadlines. (Any of this sound familiar?)

I've recommended this book to clients and friends. One gave a copy to his boss, who immediately made it required reading for all technology managers. This is one of the few books that provides insightful leadership suggestions specific to the unique characteristics of technology organizations and employees. It left me wondering, though, given that this book helps non-technical managers understand and lead geeks, is there a book that flips that fishbowl inside-out and helps geeks understand and work with non-technical colleagues and managers? Perhaps that's on Glen's to-do list.

Sue Dorward is a tech management coach based in New Jersey. She can be reached at sue@sudocoaching.com.