



Good supervisors for gifted employees

Noks Nauta, Sieuwke Ronner, Donatienne Brasseur

February 14, 2012

1. Introduction

More and more often we read about the importance of the conservation and development of talent in organizations. Recognizing, developing and keeping talent in-house puts special demands of managers. Adequate leadership has a substantial added value to organizations. Research into leadership (De Vries et al, 2004) indicates that a supervisor can only have a significant effect on organizations when his or her leadership is in line with the needs of the employees. The better the co-operation between supervisor and employee, the more effective the leadership will be and with that the benefits to the organization.

Not a lot of literature has been published about managing of (gifted) talent. Recently Lackner (2012) wrote a book about this (in German). In this book he has based his observations on some Dutch articles (by Corten, Nauta and Ronner in various combinations, see references). To gain more insight into the needs of gifted employees we asked members of Mensa Netherlands about their opinion and experiences with supervisors (and managers) at work, and how their guidance has made their talents prosper.

This research showed that members of Mensa have a broad shared perspective on the characteristics and behaviour of the 'ideal' supervisor. Besides a great need for autonomy it is striking that the gifted people who were consulted also have a need for structure and performance objectives on the one side, and appreciation, respect, commitment and being listened to on the other side.

Below we will give a description of the survey and its results. In a follow-up article we will present some recommendations for gifted employees about the relationship with their supervisor and we will address the question what would be a 'fitting' job and working environment for them, based on the results of the survey.

2. Survey

We composed the following list of open questions:

- What did you, based on your experience as an employee, think is a *pleasant supervisor*?
- How would you describe this person in terms of:
 1. *Characteristics* of this person? (man, woman, age, level of education, kind of work, etc.);
 2. *Qualities* of this person? (i.e. empathic, enterprising, facilitating, concerned, warm, careful, considerate, etc.);
 3. His or her *behaviour* towards you? As specific as possible;
 4. Which suggestions would you give to supervisors of gifted employees?

The questions were available on a 'Wiki' page on the Dutch Mensa site from late December 2010 until February 1, 2011.



3. Contributors

129 Members answered the questions: 62 men, 63 women and 4 didn't fill in their gender. 12 Members returned unusable information, for example by only mentioning that the survey was very interesting, or by saying they were managers or supervisors themselves or self-employed or by not giving any responses at all. 117 Responses were used in the analysis: 55 men, 59 women and 3 of unknown gender.

Contributors varied broadly in number of working hours and profession.

4. Results

Based on the number of reactions and the elaborate answers we can say that the theme of this survey struck a chord in a large number of Mensa members. Processing the answers we found that the contributors didn't always distinguish between characteristics, qualities and behaviour of their supervisors. There was also a large number of contributors who told us their wishes for, instead of their experiences with a pleasant supervisor. Therefore we will limit ourselves to the general characteristics of the descriptions of the ideal supervisor for gifted employees based on the experiences and recommendations of the contributors.

4.1 The 'ideal' supervisor for gifted employees

Where *behaviour* is concerned a supervisor is considered good when he/she

- has room for and recognizes the uniqueness of the gifted employee, for example in flexibility in approach, not exercising control, using the talents of the gifted employee;
- offers a structured environment where clear boundaries are set to the need for autonomy of the gifted employee, with performance objectives that are in the interest of the organization;
- create a climate where gifted employees thrive: give them trust, facilitate, motivate, delegate, and give credit for their part in the department's successes.

Gifted employees find the supervisor a stimulating *person* when he/she

- is people-oriented: has an interest in people, is approachable, has respect, is open and honest, is concerned with the person and the work, is empathic and has a keen sense of fairness, is task-oriented and goal-oriented and has a vision.

Furthermore it is stimulating if the supervisor has insight in the subject at hand, is a good sounding board, has a sense of humour, is flexible and most of all has enough self-confidence to not feel threatened by the gifted employee.

4.2 Structure objectives

Patterns emerge from the responses about the desired structure of the work as well. The contributors feel that autonomy should have a clear framework. They need (unambiguous) performance objectives, concrete goals and clear expectations of the supervisors about an assignment. Their autonomy is created by asking for freedom in the way the results are produced. The end result will be assessed. The supervisor is expected to facilitate them in realising the end result.



4.3 No hierarchy

Gifted employees appreciate working together based on equality and looking for solutions within that framework. A supervisor shouldn't treat the gifted employee as someone to compete with. The supervisor is however allowed to share criticisms and be a sparring partner in discussions. Equality and trust are key values in this.

5. Discussion

We don't know if the contributors are representative for all Mensa members or for all gifted employees in The Netherlands. We are very pleased about the large number of contributors, the range of number of working hours and professions reported. From the number of reactions and the elaborate remarks with the answers we deduce that this research subject strikes a chord with quite a few Mensa members.

For more well-substantiated statements about gifted employees and their supervisors a different kind of survey would be necessary. The results of this survey could be seen as indicative. We hope that more scientific research will be done to improve the knowledge we have about gifted employees at work, which will in turn ensure that the talents of gifted people can be utilized better and more profusely.

References

- Corten, F., Nauta, N. & Ronner, S. Highly intelligent and gifted employees - key to innovation? Academic paper International HRD Conference, October 2006. See www.werkenwaarde.nl.
- Lackner, M. Talent-Management spezial. Hochbegabte, Forscher, Künstler ... erfolgreich führen. Wiesbaden: Gabler/ Springer, 2012.
- Nauta, N. & Corten, F. Hoogbegaafden aan het werk. [Voor de praktijk] TBV 2002; 10(11): 332-335.
- Nauta, N., Ronner, S. Giftedness in the work. Environment. English translation of: Hoogbegaafdheid op het werk. Achtergronden en praktische aanbevelingen. [Voor de praktijk] TBV 16 (2008): 396-399.
- Vries, R. E. de, Roe, R. A., Tallieu, Th. C. B. & Nelissen, N. J. M. Behoefte aan leiderschap in organisaties: wie heeft het en waarom? Gedrag & Organisatie, Vol.17, Juni 2004, nr.3, pp. 204-226.

Authors

Noks Nauta is an occupational physician and work and organizational psychologist, working for the IHBV. Noksnauta@ihbv.nl

Sieuwke Ronner is a psychologist, mediator and organizational expert. Info@meriones.nl

Donatienne Brasseur MBA, is an expert concerning organizational change donatienne@brucelle.be

Translation into English

Yvonne Veltmaat, July 2012