

# **Leading Geeks**

How to Manage and Lead  
People Who Deliver Technology

**Paul Glen**

Foreword by  
**David H. Maister**



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## **More Praise for Leading Geeks**

“Paul Glen masterfully and humorously teaches us how to create followership in this notoriously inscrutable but essential population. Ignore his rock-solid advice at your own peril.”

—Andrew Sobel, author, *Clients for Life* and *Making Rain*

“*Leading Geeks* nails the complex geek psyche and offers pragmatic advice and insight for those who wish to harness the power of these most valuable employees. This book is required reading for anyone in my company who works with geeks.”

—Michael Mori, president, Network Insight

“Paul Glen has put a lot of thought into the particular (and at times peculiar) needs of the technical computer staff—the geeks. For those who must lead technical personnel, this book offers some invaluable ‘aha’s’ regarding what makes them tick and how to capitalize on their idiosyncrasies to achieve outstanding performance. And Glen doesn’t stop there. Even if you’re a seasoned technical manager, you can’t get through this book without picking up a few tips to make your job easier and your group more effective.”

—Jeff Chasney, senior vice president and chief information officer, Carl Karcher Enterprises

“This book is a must-read for anyone who has to deal with the techno-geeks of today’s society. Paul has encapsulated the essence of managing these folks effectively without losing his sense of humor and his perspective.”

—Marsha Lewin, author, *The Overnight Consultant*, *The Consultant’s Survival Guide*, *Better Software Project Management*, and coauthor, *Software Project Management*

“*Leading Geeks* provides a unique and pragmatic perspective on the issues faced by technologists as they create value within an organization. The ideas here will help any technical business.”

—Allen Dickason, senior vice president and chief technology officer, Kinko’s

“I recognize the geeks Mr. Glen describes from my time at Apple Computer working with the team that invented the Macintosh. If I’d had this book in 1981, there’s no doubt that I could have better served the human resources needs of that team.”

—Vicki Milledge, program manager, emerging leaders program,  
Center for Collaborative Leadership, University of Massachusetts Boston

“This book is a must-read for all who struggle with leading the technical workforce. I’m going to be assigning it to all my students.”

—David Finegold, head of strategy and organizations studies, Keck  
Graduate Institute for Applied Life Sciences

“This book is a great read, easily understood and logically organized. It will definitely help leaders gain the skills needed to be successful in today’s technologically dependent organizations.”

—Ronne Froman, rear admiral, United States Navy (retired)

“Although ostensibly about technologists, *Leading Geeks* provides broader insights into the nature and management of knowledge workers in general. In fact, this book would be very valuable for university managers who are trying to ‘lead’ their faculty knowledge workers!”

—Margaret Hellie Huyck, professor of psychology,  
Illinois Institute of Technology

“Using gentle humor and keen intellect, Paul Glen pries the covers off an often mysterious group of key contributors. Wondering what makes geeks tick, and how to get them ticking in sync with the rest of the business? This book will show you how.”

—Marian Cook, president, Ageos Enterprises

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Published by Jossey-Bass

A Wiley Imprint

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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Glen, Paul, 1965-

Leading geeks: how to manage and lead people who deliver technology /  
Paul Glen; foreword by David H. Maister.

p. cm.

"A Warren Bennis book."

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7879-6148-5 (alk. paper)

1. Technology-Management. I. Title.

T49.5. G554 2003

658.5'7—dc21

2002011845

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Printed in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

HB Printing

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# Editor's Note

Every day, new technology is revolutionizing the way we work and the way we live. Companies and leaders unwilling or unable to embrace technology have watched their more adaptable competitors pass them by. Meanwhile, top technology workers are in high demand, which has allowed to persist the idea that eccentric, unmanageable “geeks” must be accepted as a necessary evil. When conventional leadership methods fail to work with geeks, many managers throw up their hands because “that’s just the way it is.”

With so much riding on the timely and skillful deployment of new technologies, leaders can’t get by merely tolerating geeks; they must find new ways to motivate and manage them to maximize the value of their work. Paul Glen has been on both sides of the fence, as a self-proclaimed geek and as a geek leader. There’s no guesswork here—he knows the people, he knows how they think and how they work, he’s been one of them. *Leading Geeks* gets inside the heads of technology workers and clearly explains what drives them to excel. The very nature of geeks—their love of challenge and their desire to create solutions—presents a vast and largely untapped resource for organizations. Glen’s insights and experience provide the keys to unlocking this potential.

This book is exactly the blueprint that leaders of technology workers need; it describes the obstacles they face and provides solid solutions. Glen illustrates the best methods for motivating geeks,

using their talents most effectively, and bridging the communication gap between geeks and the rest of the organization. *Leading Geeks* is also a guide to attracting and keeping the best technology talent. Geeks don't bestow their loyalty on a leader for the same reasons that other employees do, nor are they easily won over by the video games and other perks of dot-com lore. The leader who understands and respects the geek way of life will reap far greater benefit than one who throws money at the problem. As Glen points out, geek loyalty is elusive but is staunch once achieved.

For leaders of organizations around the world, the Technology Revolution has been the type of event that Robert J. Thomas and I, in our book *Geeks and Geezers*, describe as a "crucible." Whether you pass the test is up to you; by holding this book in your hands, you are already well on your way.

*Santa Monica, California*  
*September 2002*

WARREN BENNIS

# Foreword

In this important and useful book, Paul Glen tackles a frontier topic in business, and does so in a way that makes a significant contribution to our understanding not only of geeks, but of professional people in general.

His articulation of the manager's tasks (provide internal facilitation, manage ambiguity, nurture motivation, and furnish external representation) is an innovative and insightful contribution to what real-world managers must do and how they serve their teams. Glen's years of practical experience are clearly reflected in the text and make this book a practical guide to action that will provide managers of technical professionals (inside corporations or in service provider firms) with concrete suggestions and, perhaps as valuable, new ways of thinking. Rather than recycle conventional thinking, he offers his own stimulating thoughts. Experienced managers as well as neophytes will find something here for them.

The book will also be of value to those who hire and deal with technical teams or interact with them in other ways, such as the venture capitalists and other financiers who must decide whether to fund technical enterprises. The old phrase "knowledge is power" is not quite correct. *Understanding* is power, and that's what Glen provides.

It is important to note that much of what is written about management and leadership attempts to be universal, providing lessons

drawn from diverse contexts and organizations with diverse objectives. In other work, we have been invited to consider the leadership secrets of military, political, royal, and religious leaders, as well as leaders of businesses of all kinds, from industrial to retail to consumer service industries.

Glen, appropriately, rejects this universalist approach. His careful analysis of the special characteristics of technical work, the individuals who choose to do that work, how they function in groups, and what all this implies for how they can be managed is a framework that others could productively follow.

While his focus is on geeks, much of what Glen has to say parallels the situation of other professional settings. I recommend this book to those who must lead other knowledge workers in a wide variety of professional settings. The book raises fascinating questions about what skills managers should possess and how they should be selected.

The test of any worthwhile book is that it forces you to stop reading and consider what the author has said. *Leading Geeks* passes this test repeatedly. While its style is breezy and accessible enough to allow a quick read, it is filled with challenging assertions that contain myriads of implications. Glen doesn't hedge his views: he states them boldly. You don't have to accept all of these views to be forced to think, "I wonder if he's right? If he is, then what follows from that?" No author can provide the reader with greater value.

*Boston, Massachusetts*  
*September 2002*

DAVID H. MAISTER

# Introduction

You can't live with 'em and you can't live without 'em. No, I'm not talking about the opposite sex. I'm talking about geeks, a.k.a. nerds, computer jockeys, or knowledge workers—the people who design, build, test, install, and support computer technology from mighty mainframes in their climate-controlled glass citadels to the humble PCs on every desktop. In the knowledge-driven, hyper-competitive, 24-7 economy, geeks are a key weapon in a business's arsenal. As technology continues to drive business productivity and competitiveness, the role of the geek becomes increasingly critical. Some think that whichever organization attracts and retains the best geeks wins in this environment. They're only half right.

Just getting the best geeks isn't good enough. You've got to know what to do with them. Even the most intelligent, motivated, good-willed geeks don't always succeed. Just think about all those dead dot-coms.

Success requires not just having good geeks, but leading them. And with technology infiltrating every area of business, from sales and marketing to operations and human resources, all managers must learn to lead geeks.

Geeks are notoriously difficult to manage and lead. Their work is frequently difficult to understand. Their demands for funds often seem insatiable. Their deliverables are always late. And, perhaps

most frustrating of all, they don't respond to traditional methods of command and control.

So where do you turn? Unfortunately, most books on leadership won't be much help. In fact, much of what you already know about leadership won't work with geeks for three primary reasons:

1. *Geeks are different from other employees.* (You probably figured out this one in grammar school.) Most leadership books begin with the fundamental assumption that leadership is a relationship between leaders and followers, and then proceed to focus almost exclusively on the knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, ethics, and behaviors of the leader, as if the nature of followers were irrelevant. But as most of you already know, not all followers are alike, and they do not respond to leadership in the same way. Geeks in particular are a special group requiring different care and feeding from others in an organization.

2. *Geekwork, the intricate, technological knowledge work that geeks perform, is different from other types of work.* Most discussions of leadership assume that leading a group of first graders on a field trip to a museum is the same as guiding a nation into war. Of course, this simply isn't true. What you are trying to lead people to do does, in fact, affect the nature of the relationship between leaders and followers.

3. *Power, the basis of most approaches to leadership, is relatively useless when dealing with geeks.* It's not just that they can be recalcitrant (which they often are), but that the nature of power renders it . . . well . . . powerless. Power is the ability to effect the behavior of others, but geeks don't deliver value through behavior. They deliver value mostly through thought rather than action, so their behavior has relatively little effect on their productivity. And because most theories of leadership are based on notions of political, organizational, or social power, they don't work too well with geeks.

If you want, or need, to lead geeks, you've got to jettison lots of what you already think about leadership and start over. This book will introduce you to the world of geek leadership and answer these and other questions:

- Who are geeks?
- What role do they play in today's businesses?
- How do geeks add value?
- How is their work structured and delivered?
- How can they be led and managed?
- How can they be integrated into the wider business organization?
- How can you improve the productivity of technology and technology workers?
- What can you do to motivate them?
- How are they different from other employees?
- Why are they so difficult to manage?

Although my primary experience is in the information technology arena, I focus here on issues common to all geekwork. Many of the principles and ideas discussed are equally applicable to scientific arenas such as biotech or pure research institutions. Many also apply to other forms of knowledge-intensive work, such as advertising, consulting, law, and architecture.

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## **Who Will Benefit from This Book**

This book is intended as a how-to guide for those who lead, manage, oversee, invest, or participate in technology projects. This is not a book about how to program a computer, install hardware, integrate software, select databases, design user interfaces, or even manage projects. This is a book about how to lead the *people*, the geeks, who do these essential things in your organization.

For executives who have become increasingly dependent on technology and the geeks who deliver technology for their success, this book will introduce you to the world of geeks, giving you the basic tools that you will need to integrate both technology and geeks into your organization.

For managers of nontechnological groups, this book will help you better understand and forge productive partnerships with geeks in all parts of the organization. Whether or not you are directly responsible for their day-to-day supervision, you need their help to get your job done.

For executives and managers within technological organizations, this book will help clarify your role as a manager and leader of these unique and critical people. It will help you move past simply managing technology and tasks and on to leading people. It will also help you to better align your organization with your client's needs and the organization's opportunities to leverage technology.

For project managers or aspiring project managers, this book provides foundational information that you'll need to deliver technology projects. Most project managers overemphasize the use of task lists, Gantt charts, budgets, and schedules as the means to successful project delivery, but these are just tools. Ultimately, all projects succeed or fail based on the work of people—the work of geeks who must be led, not just managed.

For human resource professionals, this book will help with the selection, hiring, counseling, and career development of technical people and organizations.

And for venture capitalists and board members of technical enterprises, this book will help you assess the leadership approach and potential of the companies that you either oversee or choose to invest in.

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## **What's in This Book**

The book is organized into four parts, each focusing on one facet of geek leadership.

In the Overview, “The Challenge of Geeks,” Chapter One explores the roles of geeks and leaders within organizations.

Part One, “The Context of Geek Leadership,” surveys several facets of the relationship among geeks, geekwork, leaders, and the organizations in which they live. The part introduction sets out the

first of two primary models around which the book is structured: the Context of Geek Leadership model. Chapters Two and Three explore the distinctive culture of geeks, identifying patterns in the beliefs and behavior of individual geeks and the effects on geeks of working in groups. Chapter Four describes the uniqueness of the intricate, technical knowledge work performed by geeks and its effects on the relationship between geeks and leaders. And Chapter Five offers a model describing the twelve ways that knowledge workers deliver value to the organization. If you want to lead geeks, this will help you understand where to lead them.

Part Two covers the role and responsibilities of the geek leader. The part introduction sets out the second of the major models around which the book is structured: the Content of Geek Leadership model. Chapter Six discusses geek motivation and what leaders can do about it. Chapter Seven describes how geek leaders operate within their groups. Chapter Eight explores the geek leader's role in representing geeks to the world outside the cubicle. Chapter Nine introduces the subject of managing ambiguity and the hierarchy of ambiguity that must be resolved to lead successfully. It also discusses managing environmental ambiguity by exploring the broad, general questions that must be considered when helping to make sense of the environment in which geeks and leaders work. Chapter Ten sets out the questions that must be considered when structuring groups of geeks within an organization. And Chapter Eleven describes the geek leader's role in helping individuals be productive.

Chapter Twelve in the Conclusion discusses the tools that geek leaders use to transform the chaos of the creative workplace into a coherent and compelling place for geeks. The References section offers other resources for learning about the topics covered in the book. And finally, the Appendix collects in a single convenient place the checklists and models referenced throughout the book.

*Marina del Rey, California*  
*September 2002*

PAUL GLEN

For Ethel Elcrat  
(1899–1997)

# Acknowledgments

No book is an island. Each one results from a collaboration of many people who deserve appreciation, and there are many whom I would like to thank for their contributions.

First, I thank Warren Bennis, without whom this book might never have been written or published. Long before I had the privilege of knowing him, his writing both informed and inspired me. I could not be more grateful for his invitation or honored by the inclusion of this book in his series. It speaks to his generosity that a world-famous author, professor, consultant, and speaker with endless demands on his time would voluntarily reach out to encourage and support the work of a younger and less established colleague.

I also express my appreciation to all of my clients who have invited me into their organizations and participated in the explorations of many of the ideas that appear in this book. Their drive to improve and to apply technology for the betterment of their organizations, employees, and customers challenges and inspires me.

Someone once told me that books were written one word at a time, but that's not entirely true. In fact, each word is written repeatedly, and many of them are appropriately left by the side of the road. Ron Rosman and Hillary Rettig were tirelessly supportive in the various stages of writing, offering ideas, challenging others, and smoothing presentation. They both showed incredible patience with incoherent early drafts. Their contributions have been

immense, and I am truly grateful to both of them for their generous assistance.

Many others have also been exceptionally generous with their time, thoughts, and support. I appreciate the contributions of Alan Weiss, David Maister, David Finegold, Mary Lynn Reed, Linda Marsa, Rick Freedman, Dagmar Kamenar, Jan Hill, Vicki Millidge, Jeanette Polaschek, Jerald Savin, Marsha Lewin, Andrew Sobel, and Marian Cook.

I also express my thanks to those whose ideas I know only through their writings but have been essential to the shaping of this book. I am deeply indebted to Howard Gardner, Teresa Amabile, James MacGregor Burns, Steve McConnell, Ed Yourdon, Gerald Weinberg, Edgar Schein, Jim McCarthy, Henry Mintzberg, Watts Humphery, and Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi.

I owe a lifetime of appreciation to my friends and mentors at SEI Information Technology, who have taught me so much over the years, including Fidelis Umeh, Pam Wiedenbeck, Yung Tsau, Greg Lewis, Kathy Radner, Lori Lunde, and Lonna Braverman.

Andrea Pedolsky was most helpful in guiding me through the intricacies of publishing law.

I thank the entire team at Jossey-Bass, including Susan Williams, Rob Brandt, Todd Berman, Jeff Wyneken, and Jesica Church. Every author should be so lucky to work with such a capable, professional, and helpful team.

I am deeply grateful to Beth Lazazzera, who has been unendingly patient with me throughout this project and has given her steadfast confidence and support.

And, of course, I thank my family: Ann, Marven, K, Cathy, Mitch, Ben, Elise, Isabel, Dorothy, and Bill.

## **Leading Geeks**



## **OVERVIEW**

# **The Challenge of Geeks**

