

## The Knowledge Worker

*by Jon Craighead*

Anyone who knows me knows that I have a passion for leadership – primarily because leadership touches every aspect of an organization. Leadership today is very different than in times past. Today management is constantly evolving and continuously dealing with critical, worldly issues. At the same time, today’s workforce is more educated, more experienced, and their skills more needed than ever before in an increasingly complex and competitive environment. A growing percentage of today’s personnel are “Knowledge Workers” – workers who rely primarily on their brains rather than their bodies. These workers are highly skilled, rare, and require special handling.

In his book *Thinking for a Living*, Thomas Davenport, a professor at Babson College, has done an exhaustive study on this dynamic employee. He defines the Knowledge Worker as follows: They are highly compensated and are paid for their thinking. They don’t like to be told what to do; they want autonomy. They prefer to think for themselves using their education, experience and expertise, so it’s not surprising they take offense when someone attempts to ride roughshod over their intellectual territory. They don’t like their work to be ignored, and they don’t like to be told things such as the broader significance and implementation of their tasks and jobs. So the question is: How to manage these workers to obtain their much needed output while simultaneously honoring the personnel who don’t fit in this category?

The old model of management was designed to interact with a very different employee than the typical one we face today. Historically, most workers depended on supervisors to advise, teach, and provide stimulation to develop skills and to progress. While it’s been clear for a while these techniques are no longer as effective as they once were, no effective replacement system has been devised to remedy this inadequacy. Recruiting today’s talented workers requires a significant investment of time and money, so it is essential that we develop the necessary methods to manage them effectively to get the job done and produce the desired results.

Thirty years ago Peter Drucker, the knowledge management guru and thought leader, coined the phrase “Knowledge Worker.” Academics and leadership experts have vociferously advocated the need to update and revise our management skills and approaches. However, it is very apparent this dilemma has not been resolved. Dr. Drucker called it a key aspect of management’s new role “to make knowledge workers

more productive.” Thirty years later we’ve yet to figure out how to increase this needed productivity.

Given the importance of this situation, managers and senior leadership will be required to immediately and expertly adapt their activities to the new realities we face. Dr. Davenport lists some specific changes leaders must undertake, including:

1. Moving away from organizing hierarchies toward organizational communities.
2. From building manual skill to building knowledge skills.
3. From hiring and firing workers to recruiting and retaining them.
4. From building manual skills to building knowledge skills.
5. From ignoring established culture to building a knowledge-friendly culture.
6. From relying on internal personnel to considering a variety of sources.

In my experience, time and again the biggest road block to moving forward is our unconscious resistance to let go of the past and move into a new domain. But the fact is, as I like to put it: everything we know will at some time be compromised by time and competition. Think of organizations such as Woolworths, WT Grant, Wanamaker’s, the Philadelphia Bulletin, and the corner video store – all one-time irreplaceable leaders and innovators and all no longer with us. It was not that they suddenly turned bad and became useless; their end was a result of innovative thinkers who replaced outmoded products with ones that are more appealing and better satisfy the needs of the marketplace.

For many managers who have succeeded by utilizing a set of tried and true principles that have served them well and become a part of the very fabric of their leadership, it is understandably difficult to let go of the old ways. But let go we must – just as the blacksmiths gave way to the automobile, the typewriter to the computer, and the magazines to the internet. What we resist will persist, and in the resisting we lose our ability to effectively serve people. Reality has no memory and deals only with the present. If we want to be successful in the marketplace we must deal in reality. We must find a way to put the creative and inventive skills of the Knowledge Worker to productive use in the workplace.