

Mad Scientists

Try leading them in five ways.



by Chip R. Bell and John R. Patterson

JAMES CAMERON IS A “MAD SCIENTIST”—and director of the two highest grossing movies ever made—*Titanic* and *Avatar*. Apple CEO Steve Jobs is probably a “mad scientist.” So were Ludwig Beethoven, Henry Ford and Amelia Earhart. Who could deny their *gigantic contributions or incredible gifts*?

We use *mad scientists* not as a reference to some evil maladjusted type like Dr. Strangelove or Frankenstein, but rather as the catch-all phrase for the gifted eccentric and unconventional wild ducks that occasionally enter organizations. Some are nerdy, some are whiz kids without manners, and some are amazing talents marching to their own drum. For most organizations they bring a mixed blessing.

All *mad scientists* have noble traits—brilliant, visionary, perfectionists, and passionately driven. They’re also very challenging to work with, extremely bull-headed, egotistical, countercultural, irreverent and sometimes borderline crazy. Organizations can’t tolerate very many *mad scientists*. They disturb the sanctity of stability and status quo. Highly conservative organizations view them as extreme misfits.

Mad scientists ask tough questions that make mediocre performers feel inadequate. They ignore tidy rules of corporate civility in a headlong pursuit of their bold visions. They poke around in areas outside their sandbox and beyond their pay grades. While they would get an A in *creativity*, their impatience with diplomacy would net them an F grade in *emotional intelligence*.

Some organizations expel all *mad scientists*. Unless these eccentrics are protected by being in the top slot—film director, CEO, or owner—they get labeled, ignored, and ostracized. Their performance reviews give short shrift to their vast achievements while spotlighting only their “does not play well with others” dimensions. They are told to get a coach or read a book

or talk with HR. Failing to be valued for their contribution, most exit for greener pastures. Consider the massive loss to the organizations they vacate.

Organizations interested in growth need a few *mad scientists*. They can make us better and more vigorous. Sure, they are complex, challenging, and difficult. But, they can propel us to greatness by being the sparkplug for the innovation engine. Of course they can make us wring our hands and shake our head. They can also insure our advancement. They are rare, and we need them.

Being a *mad scientist* can be lonely. And, being the leader of a *mad scientist* can be nerve racking. As the boss, you are perpetually surprised by events that signal your *mad scientist* has “done it again!” Other employees are in your office complaining about their quirky actions, rude business etiquette, and insensitive cross examinations. You wonder if the *practical return* is worth the *emotional cost*.

Five Ways to Lead Mad Scientists

To maximize the value of your *mad scientists* without losing them to competitors or resorting to pricy *personality transplants*, lead them in five ways:

1. Embrace their weirdness. Don’t try to explain why *mad scientists* are the way they are. You can’t reprogram eccentricity or turn off a compelling vision. Searching for a rational explanation for their idiosyncrasies implies that if they can be *understood* they can be “cured.” The goal is not to *change* them but to effectively *lead* them in order to harness their creative energies. Accept their treasures and steer their talents.

2. Provide loose control and tight guidance. Since *mad scientists* live in the big picture world, they must be given an accurate view at the macro level but *not* micro-managed. *They can be successfully led but are poorly managed.* External controls trigger their aversion to restrictions and constraints. They do not deal well with mindless policies, narrow job descriptions, and obsessive controls that seek to convert them from “wild ducks” to barnyard chickens. They work nontraditional hours, guided more by the rhythm of their work than

the hands of the clock. However, they need hard and fast boundaries regarding where an overstep risks the mission. Without governors, *mad scientists* can be a clear and present danger.

3. Run interference for them. *Mad scientists* need sponsors and champions with gladiator-like traits to take on naysayers and the frustrated mob. They need someone who always has a “get out of jail free” card—a defender who can explain their contribution in a way that makes defending their foibles unnecessary. They need a scout shrewd enough in corporate politics to provide them *early warning* regarding interpersonal mine fields and lurking ambushes. Without a front team, *mad scientists* are *marginalized* and rendered *impotent*.

4. Resource them. *Mad scientists* need more latitude and a higher tolerance for their errors. They may present 12



approaches, 11 of which are wacky, but the 12th genius. Discarding the first 11 before reviewing all their ideas risks missing breakthroughs. Give them the latest tools and access to the best minds. They need a network of like-minded “scientists” (one of Henry Ford’s best friends was

Thomas Edison). They need an easy entrée to information and access to a cadre of people who can help them refine their “perfect” idea into an effective application.

5. Celebrate them. *Mad scientists* need little public affirmation—but they do want credit. Seeing a lesser being get the prize they earned draws sharp disapproval. But, applause and attaboys others may cherish are not what drive them—the intrinsic give-back of their work is enough. However, celebration can help others learn to value their contribution. Celebration enables fellow employees to separate the person from the performance. It can foster their resilience and facilitate other’s patience. And, if their presence becomes intolerable and no skunk works-like outlet is available, celebrate them by helping them migrate to organizations where their talents will be better used.

Effectively led, mavericks, eccentrics, rebels, and nonconformists can be catalysts for true greatness and make huge contributions. However, like wild horses, they should never be domesticated. *Well-behaved people seldom make history.* LE

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ACTION: Lead your mad scientists.