

I am sure you know the answer. So does my seven years old son. The only name the thought of a light bulb brings to our mind is Edison [\[1\]](#) . And yes, that is correct. This is exactly what I thought, till I got my hands on an interesting book on high performance teams

“The Orange Revolution”

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Like most of us, Edison was for me, just a great scientist, a creative genius. My image of Edison was of a quiet and a very serious man, with ruffled hair and scrunched up lab coat, running around in a laboratory conducting experiments all day and night. It never occurred to me that there was another facet to his personality which has rarely been discussed, he was an incredible leader.

The truth is that the invention of the incandescent light bulb was not the result of 9999 tireless efforts of Edison alone, but it was a product and reflection of his remarkable leadership style. His major accomplishment was selection of an outstanding team and his ability to ignite the passion of creativity in them.

The light bulb was actually a fruit of hard labor by Edison and his team - a highly committed group of people, who gladly burnt the midnight oil to discover the mysteries of science. They used to work extensive hours, usually all night, to avoid any distractions and would catch up on sleep during a few hours in the day. The laboratory time log showed 32 continuous hours or 60 hours, not out of compulsion, but due to their sheer dedication and desire to learn.

One of his lab assistants described his work as “strenuous but joyous”. In a letter to his father, Upton, an integral team member, wrote ***“The strangest thing to me is the \$12 I get each Sunday, for my labor. which does not seem like work but like a study”.***

Edison was truly a genius, an inspiring leader who put together an outstanding team, the result of which is illumination, both literally and figuratively. He was one of the most brilliant minds in the world but he was aware of the fact that he alone did not possess all the answers. His team usually did.

I am keen to share with you three aspects of his leadership style which resonated with me:

1. Selection of team

Getting the right people on board is undoubtedly a tough challenge which has been haunting leaders in the past and even in present times. Edison actively sought out men with a broad base of knowledge, a passion for learning, impeccable character, and a commitment to excellence. He not only spotted talent but nurtured it by providing an environment conducive for learning, a lab where hits and trials were appreciated; where no failure was a failure, but a new learning.

His team comprised of highly qualified, skilled people with just the right attitude, people who had curious minds and would not settle for quick fixes. People who were self-motivated and result-oriented.

2. Training & empowerment

Encouraging, motivating & empowering were Edison's hallmark. He used to divide his teams into small groups and assign them different projects. They were given a goal and the space to pursue it independently.

He used to roam around the lab checking in on his teams of experimenters - examining, suggesting but hardly ever interfering. He believed in team empowerment and rightly so, as he had worked so hard in forming the ideal team.

An expert and a seasoned gardener sweats more while plowing the soil and planting the best seeds. All he needs to do is to patiently nurture the natural process of growth. That's exactly how Edison led his teams.

3. Appreciation & Loyalty

A true leader believes in the magical of RR & R – roles, responsibilities and recognition. Clearly defined individual/team roles and responsibilities are essential when assigning tasks, as is genuinely recognizing individual and team contributions.

Edison shared his vision, labor, fun and of course rewards with his team. He recognized the efforts of his key team members and rewarded them with shares in Edison's companies. Most importantly, he invited them to invest in projects they were leading, thus becoming shareholders. This built a deep sense of ownership in the enterprise.

He also showed utmost respect to their talent by promoting them to leadership positions in his new companies. As a leader, he not only shared his wealth of knowledge and wisdom, but also big chunks of the 'pie' in the form shares. He believed it was not possible to bake the 'pie' without the efforts, commitment and passion of his team.

While we have always acknowledged Edison for his creative genius, it is his high time we also celebrate his inspiring team leadership – the bright example of which endures to this day.

[1] Thomas Alva **Edison** (February 11, 1847 – October 18, 1931) was an American inventor and businessman.

[\[2\] The Orange Revolution: How One Great Team Can Transform an Entire Organization](#) by Adrian Gostick and Chester Elton (Sep 21, 2010)
