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Leadership Collaboration  
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# **Gaining Employee Commitment in Tough Times**

**Performance and Potential in R&D Today**

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An SFB Associates Position Paper

## Gaining Employee Commitment in Tough Times

### Performance and Potential in R&D Today

#### Summary Abstract

***How can leaders tap the full potential of employees to improve the performance of their R&D pipeline without generating more stress for those already under pressure to deliver?***

Variations of this question have been explicitly asked by our clients in recent months; and it lies not far beneath the surface of many management discussions, especially when times are tough and resources strained.

This paper provides guidance for more authentic engagement and skillful inquiry in exploring questions of organizational performance and employee potential. We identify four reasons why there is a “political” aspect to all answers to this question in the R&D environment. We review four ways of practicing “skillful inquiry” to optimize employee engagement in the process. Finally, we correlate research on employee engagement with work we do with the Politics of Creativity™ to uncover blind spots in organizational culture and leadership practices.

The political nature of the inquiry about performance and potential, both individual and organizational, will either deepen employee engagement in the very process of inquiry or perpetuate more cynicism and distrust. The goal is to inspire by the way one inquires.

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**SFB Associates** is a global consulting practice that focuses on leadership collaboration and development especially for leaders in R&D. Based in Minneapolis MN, SFB Associates has worked with senior R&D executives in Fortune 100 companies as well as front-line supervisors, senior scientists, and project leaders. SFB Associates brings more than twenty years experience from across industry to our continuing work.

## Gaining Employee Commitment in Tough Times

### Performance and Potential in R&D Today

“I’m just going to do what they tell me to do, because that’s what I am being scored on,” lamented a biomedical engineer recently with more than twenty years experience in her company’s basic research function. Ironically, and sadly, as the pressure to deliver new value increases, the willingness to risk exploring genuinely innovative possibilities is diminishing. Juxtaposed with this prevalent employee attitude, management is asking, one way or another, “Does our R&D pipeline reflect the full potential of our employees?” Managers working with constrained resources in the current economic environment understandably strive for organizational efficiencies to optimize productivity. The drive for innovation persists but business “processes on steroids” are often management’s response to growing anxiety about the very survival of critical markets.

The pressure to sustain short-term profit margins, supporting legacy products and services, discourages more robust, higher risk, breakthrough thinking. In this sense, the drive for innovation, near-term, can actually stifle the very creativity it seeks to encourage. Maintaining stability becomes “good enough,” perpetuating the status quo but failing to create the business growth required for a sustainable future.

“Innovation is the specific instrument of entrepreneurship...the act that endows resources with a new capacity to create wealth,” wrote Peter Drucker, perhaps the most respected management guru of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The very “capacity to create wealth” embodied in an entrepreneurial spirit is severely compromised as managers and the employees they lead are more and more cautious about deviating from tried and true processes and practices. At the same time, many are beginning to realize that they are losing something critical, the will and courage to reach for something “new.” Management based on short-term performance rather than long-term value is squelching any spark of entrepreneurial spirit.

Even prior to the current economic down-turn more than one of our clients posed the question: **Does the performance of our R&D pipeline reflect the full potential of our scientists and engineers?** There are multiple problems with the question itself. The question is subject to misunderstanding and can readily become demotivating, whether it is asked explicitly by management or remains just below the surface of R&D discussions. Either way, the question, “Are **they** working up to their full potential?” does not go away. The purpose of this discussion is to explore the liabilities of the question itself while at the same time advocating that skillful inquiry can build trust and energize an increasingly discouraged technical workforce. The political nature of any answer to questions of performance and potential is highlighted to encourage more effective R&D leadership behavior, regardless of position.

### The “Political” Nature of the Question

Consider the different possibilities for interpreting the meaning of the question itself: “Does the performance of our R&D pipeline reflect the full potential of our scientists and engineers?” As posed, this is a “closed” question. A powerful as well as engaging question does not invite a “yes” or “no” response. How the inquiry is framed makes all the difference between intent and impact.

Whether explicitly raised or more obliquely explored, the question provokes cynicism and defensive behaviors, unless a safe venue for dialogue and even debate is created. The “political” nature of the question emerges when we fail to appreciate the multiple perspectives on the meaning of the question itself and lack tolerance for the multiplicity of possible responses it evokes.

“Squeeze more work out of us” is how some employees interpret the intent of the question. In

another client organization seeking to “maximize the intellectual and business contribution of all employees,” many technical professionals inferred that management was finally realizing how the existence of a dedicated “break-through” program had de facto relegated most of the R&D organization to short-term, incremental projects, discouraging more innovative initiative throughout the entire function. Others saw the “political” element at play by hoping that technical leaders would perhaps now have a “seat at the table” when more strategic decisions were being made. And some simply embraced the question optimistically, believing “there is always more potential.”

The framing of the question is a political skill. And, most any answer to the question will be political. In our judgment it is inevitable that questions of performance and potential will always be political. Political does not necessarily mean “bad” or “sinister” or any of the other pejorative connotation we have come to associate with the word. Wherever people gather, in every enterprise – most certainly in business – a necessary and proper exercise of power and control is required to achieve stated ends, presumably for the common good. This is no less true in R&D where the drive for discovery and commercialization is more intense than ever.

*How the inquiry is framed makes all the difference between intent and impact.*

Over twenty years ago, Peter Block, a respected organizational consultant, published *The Empowered Manager, Positive Political Skills at Work*. His purpose was to address the dilemma of managers “in the middle” where “re-kindling the entrepreneurial spirit” was imperative. Our associations with the word “political” inhibit the very inquiry and understanding that Block so effectively undertook more than two decades ago. The quest for innovation and sustainable value requires no less political skill today than it did twenty years ago; one could argue it requires even more! Block writes:

*Making changes in organizations in a way that maintains support from*

*those around us is what political skill is all about. ...There is no more engaging and volatile aspect of work life than the dimension of organizational politics. In most places, people are not comfortable discussing politics openly. ...In fact, the first rule of politics is that nobody will tell you the rules.*

Let’s return to the question of performance and potential, and to the task of skillful inquiry to deepen employee engagement rather than generate cynicism and arouse further distrust. It is essential that one makes underlying assumptions explicit and holds the possibility of differing perspectives on the very question itself. The inquiry is valuable if not essential. The answers will always be “political.”

## **Four “Political” Factors in Every Answer**

Beyond consideration of how the question itself is framed, there are at least four factors, which contribute to every answer to the question being inadequate and “political.” First, in our experience, the deeper one goes into an R&D organization, the less clarity and shared understanding about the criteria for “high performance,” whether referring to organizational or individual performance. This is often due to inadequate line of sight to commercialization and business outcomes; but business leaders are not exempt from this quandary either. In a recent conversation with the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, a question about his greatest concern regarding R&D performance prompted the following response: “Tell me what I get from my R&D! What’s the true value of R&D? Nobody can answer this question, nobody!” If that’s the CEO’s response, is it any wonder it’s a political question for others in the organization? The need to communicate and validate again and again shared understanding of “success” criteria in a research environment is especially important. There are those who labor diligently for years with little or no recognition or near-term reward for their “failed” efforts.

Secondly, R&D performance, again whether considering organizational productivity or individual effectiveness, cannot be evaluated in isolation apart from other variables in the larger business enterprise. Factors ranging from resource allocation (e.g., reducing R&D spend) to over-all business strategy (e.g. choosing to secure current market rather than break into new) to portfolio balance (e.g., near-horizon vs. long-term projects) – these and other factors all impact the assessment of R&D productivity at any given point in time. Furthermore, there are multiple variables, which affect an individual’s performance (e.g., relationship with one’s immediate manager), which are seldom fully explored when management inquires about the function’s performance-at-large. Questions in complex systems seldom if ever have only one answer. **“Does the performance of our R&D pipeline reflect the full potential of our talent?”** requires skillful inquiry that makes underlying assumptions explicit and thoughtfully considers the position and role of others in the larger system.

Furthermore, the assessment of R&D performance is almost always retrospective, based on tangible results achieved to date by past management practices. “No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it,” is an oft-cited comment of Albert Einstein. Patrick Scaglia, Vice President and CTO of HP’s Imaging and Printing Group recently commented in a discussion about innovation: *“Processes are fundamentally a backward thing. Most of the processes are created and have been put in place, managed, by looking backward. They are not designed for some unknown new future. However, rigor (and discipline) are still required for innovation.”* Business processes are often based more on the stability of past success than the promise of future possibilities.

Proven processes have provided scalable results with new efficiencies. There is, however, an inherent conflict between established ways of working and the need to implement new business models, which are critical to innovation. Innovative business models cannot be derived based on 20/20 hindsight. Performance, both individual and organizational, can be inhibited by processes, which have been enhanced again and again to the

point where their strength has become their very limitation. Discussion of this phenomenon can indeed be very “political.”

The fourth factor, which makes any answer to questions of performance potentially “political,” is the reality that human potential is not static or limited. Potential can never be fully captured by some metric. Creating new value is intricately linked with passion, commitment and inspiration - qualities that evoke creativity as well as innovation. That should not keep one, however, from asking the question of how to accomplish more with current resources. The pool of highly skilled technical talent is the most valuable resource of any R&D function. People grow if nurtured, empowered, and challenged – and so does their potential.

In the midst of an economic downturn, it is easy enough to become compliant, if not complacent. That’s the attitude reflected in the comment of the engineer cited in the opening paragraph of this discussion.

Professionals will do whatever is required to hold on to their jobs, including keeping their heads down and just working harder. These conditions easily give way to discouragement – feeling there is little one can do to make a difference. Managers who step up and effectively lead in tough times understand and encourage commitment over pure compliance. In a recent breakfast meeting centered on these issues, Peter Erickson, Sr. Vice President, Innovation, Technology and Quality at General Mills, stated: *“I know people are engaged when they fight for their ideas, when they take the time to argue with me. I want them to move from obligatory compliance to passionate defiance.”* Defiance, ironically, can be an expression of commitment. Good leaders understand this.

Employee commitment is not a sufficient condition for innovation to flourish but it is a necessary one. Those who wish to be market leaders when the economy revives dare not ignore what is required to move beyond compliance to commitment. Good leaders explore and discuss with others what really matters to them and help them to re-ignite their passion. Without such interest on the part of those we respect and maybe even admire, the drive to exceed one’s own limits

is lost; innovation becomes little more than a company slogan. And the future is merely a prospect reminiscent of a productive past.

*Defiance, ironically, can be an expression of commitment. Good leaders understand this.*

## The Power of True Engagement

Scientists and engineers define tomorrow's world today. They are passionate, resourceful, talented professionals whose expertise is most often the result of years of highly disciplined technical training. They are conditioned to excel through discovery and problem-solving. And, they like to be challenged. The question of R&D performance – and the corollary commitment (or lack thereof) of technical professionals to excellence – is valid, necessary, and timely. It is critical for R&D leaders to continually create new ways to challenge and foster the passion of technical professionals.

During Cargill's Global Technology Managers' Meeting in Amsterdam recently, Chris Mallett, Corporate VP of R&D at Cargill and his Global Technology Leadership Team asked some 80 technology directors to research and make recommendations on "core technologies" for the corporation. The "assignment" was new and different because they were asked, in preparation for the meeting, to work in small virtual teams outside their given discipline with other colleagues from around the world. As a result untapped expertise as well as hidden passion was uncovered; these "experts" were engaged beyond their defined roles. Mallett comments:

*One of our challenges is to ensure the collective resources of our own talent across the company are properly recognized and engaged. The poster sessions not only energized all our technologists working in different disciplines and businesses; they also provided novel technical insights. We achieved new understanding and commitment not*

*just to critical technologies across our total business, but to one another and our respective business partners.*

Managers too easily diminish their effectiveness by asking for "more" without addressing the variables, which will actually evoke passionate engagement and sustained commitment from employees. Real leaders know that the creative impetus of scientific discovery requires more than will-power. Managers motivate. Leaders inspire! Neither alone is sufficient in the long run. Both are required for sustainable performance. Ask others what they are passionate about, even when the demand for deliverables dominates! The inquiry itself builds trust and energizes. Without sustained attention to the spirit of any work environment, performance will be short-lived no matter how great the effort to increase innovative productivity.

*Ask others what they are passionate about, even when the demand for deliverables dominates! The inquiry itself builds trust and energizes.*

The benefits of skilled inquiry are numerous, but simply relying on organizational surveys as the primary method of inquiry will not suffice. Asking questions opens up space and should create bonds rather than breaking them. As we have illustrated above, in discussing the recurring question(s) of performance and potential, failure to acknowledge the "political" aspect of some of the toughest questions can, indeed, inadvertently de-motivate and disenfranchise organizations further.

The existence of employee survey practices is by far and away the most immediate response cited by managers when we inquire how they seek to gain insight about employee potential and commitment. Unfortunately, in our experience, the administration of organization-wide surveys can inadvertently exacerbate the problem of employee engagement rather than tapping into more potential. This is true even in the most successful companies with which we have worked. The following anecdote is not unique to the occurrence cited: One client group designated an entire half-day of a two-day offsite with their top 200 technical leaders to discuss segmented feedback

from a recent corporate culture survey. Working in multiple breakout groups, one group responsible for discussing the survey dimension related to “serving the customer” quickly uncovered a common core issue – lack of shared understanding. The group discounted the value of the entire survey almost completely because of a lack of consensus in the R&D function of who the “customer” really is. The entire 90 minutes of the break-out session was spent questioning the entire survey process because of the lack of such clarity across the function. While such occasions could offer the opportunity to define and clarify such discrepancies, it frequently fails to happen.

Andy Kaldor, now retired Distinguished Scientific Advisor and Manager of Downstream Breakthrough Research at ExxonMobil reflects on the antidote to “break-downs” spurred by organizational surveys:

*Surveys have seldom worked in my experience. Carefully constructed personal interviews by skilled individuals who were able to adjust the nature of the inquiry real time, based on the response of the client’s R&D staff have produced the most valuable insights. Based on such input very productive group sessions have been organized with the appropriate definitions of terms agreed to by all. The resulting*

*capacity of the group to own the output of their inquiry energizes a team to deliver and focus on value they believe in, validating and adjusting as a continuous learning process.*

Engagement is promoted most powerfully by being engaged oneself. Demonstrating, for example, the all too elusive skill of listening can be more motivating, if not inspiring, than all the best-intended “communication” (read: one-way dissemination of information). Everyone has blind spots. Our best intentions often have unintended consequences. This is as true when it comes to engaging employees as any other aspect of leadership.

Sometimes we miss the obvious. As one technical manager simply put it: “If (name of R&D executive) would only just take his tie off and walk around the labs a bit, it would make a HUGE difference in morale and have an immediate impact.” Choice follows awareness. We want to expand the range of choices for leaders as they strive to invite and secure the commitment of their talent.

**To summarize our discussion thus far:**

The first task in working with the recurring question of R&D performance and employee potential is to uncover the range of assumptions attributed to the question itself. Intent and impact are often not aligned. Furthermore, responses to the question are invariably “political” for at least four reasons:

1. inadequate agreement on what high performance means;
2. systemic variables inadequately considered;
3. reliance on more and more processes to the point of choking innovative initiative; and
4. failure to nurture the unlimited potential inherent in the human spirit to create value and make a difference.

## Practicing Skilled Inquiry: Four Ways

As stated at the outset, our purpose is to describe the liabilities of how a question is framed, and given its persistent recurrence, to share ways in which the concern can be addressed in a manner that is not de-motivating, but inspiring. Managers motivate. Leaders inspire. Beyond facilitating skillful inquiry into underlying assumptions embedded in the question itself, we have worked with clients to model engagement creatively in their efforts to foster higher performance. To encourage technical professionals to stretch for the promise of the future through their discovery and development work, we have found the following four practices to be especially valuable to leaders and easy to implement for the organizations they serve:

1. Listening Posts
2. Cascading Conversations
3. Skip-Level Meetings
4. Barrier-Busting by Managers

Illustrated below are ways in which these practices, in our judgment, go beyond the usual political pitfalls of always pushing for more, to acquiring new insight into the untapped potential of R&D employees. While certainly not exhaustive of the possibilities, our clients have validated success with these four practices in particular.

**Listening Posts** define a set time and place where, according to a pre-established protocol, managers listen rather than talk with a cross-section of employees. Sometimes the simplest of practices are indeed the most challenging. Creating a “safe environment” where others feel acknowledged and heard is not a practice that most managers are particularly attentive to nor adept at - the number of technical presentations they sit through notwithstanding. While aware that critical knowledge often lies closest to the practitioners at the lab bench, admonitions to “speak up” seldom result in the most valuable insights being disclosed. This is especially true when inquiring about employee engagement and commitment. Time and attention is a rare commodity in a stressed work environment. Leaders who recognize the ROI of

listening achieve exceptional advantage when it comes to securing employee commitment.

Launching a series of listening posts may well be met with indifference if not doubt. With one organization, skepticism was most prevalent among senior managers as much or more than all the rest of the employees. The head of the labs announced he was convening a series of lunch-time listening posts in the 12th floor boardroom once a month for NINE months. Concerns about opening the boardroom to a cross-section of employees from all levels of the organization, including technical and administrative assistants, became outright political, if not blatantly elitist, in the senior ranks.

An imaginative storytelling exercise and a focused inquiry about when you felt most alive in your job were the only prompts provided in this particular series of meetings. The head of the labs collected wisdom and inspiration from some 200 employees, which he acknowledged and shared in subsequent all-employee meetings. And he was inspired! His articulation of a new vision for the R&D function was informed and accelerated by these meetings. A year later senior managers were convening listening posts of their own in different segments of the organization. Eventually senior managers were modeling engagement, not surveying it. Listening and learning were the skills that served to enliven the organization while enrolling employees in a new sense of what was possible.

*Leaders who recognize the ROI of listening achieve exceptional advantage when it comes to securing employee commitment.*

**Cascading Conversations** focus on involving employees in assessing the over-all performance, engagement, and commitment of the talent that resides in an organization. To be clear, the intent is not to address matters related to individual performance appraisal but rather provide a means by which leaders can take a barometer reading of the vitality of an R&D organization’s most valued resource, its people. In our practice, we work with client organizations to frame a set of questions

about priority concerns. Inhibitors to creativity and innovation as reflected in leadership practices and behavior are a common theme we explore. We conduct interviews with an agreed upon number of employees, representing a cross-section of the organization. The information and insight gathered are presented to the leadership team with the individuals interviewed invited to participate. Together we facilitate dialogue for understanding and prepare to focus the cascading conversations.

All those initially interviewed are then invited, as the next step, to convene a conversation with a small group of employees of their own choosing – any configuration or grouping that they deem valuable – to continue the dialogue and cascade the conversation. Specific guidelines are provided for facilitation of the cascading conversation as well as agreed upon protocols for reporting who was engaged in all subsequent conversations. Attention is given to preserving the participants’ trust and anonymity when reporting to senior leadership. Six to eight weeks later all those who have convened cascading conversations meet once again with the senior leadership team to discuss what they are discovering and learning together after talking with some 200 employees.

While similar to focus groups that might be conducted by professionals, whether internal or external, cascading conversations are owned and facilitated by the employees themselves. The senior leadership team’s behavior empowers others to launch new and different conversations in the organization. For example, with one client, an inquiry about inhibitors to creativity and innovation uncovered a fear of speaking up and the consequences of deviating too far too quickly from standard research protocols. The means are well-aligned with the intent; the inquiry itself encourages employee engagement and initiative. The very method of inquiry deepens trust and uncovers new possibilities.

**Skip-Level Meetings** are successful only if carefully planned. It is critical to minimize the threat to managers whose direct reports are invited to talk with leaders one or two levels higher in the organizational hierarchy *without* their immediate managers being present. In some organizational cultures, the respect for delegated authority and

hierarchical management is so strong that disrupting that chain in any way is considered anathema.

Even when scheduled and convened, such meetings may nevertheless elicit only “conditioned responses” to what is perceived as management’s position. There are some simple but essential tactics to preserve trust and build credibility when employees are invited to dialogue directly with leaders several levels above them in the organization (without their managers present). These include: (1) inviting participants to talk with one another to ease tension and break the ice – numerous techniques for doing so can be introduced throughout the meeting by the senior leader convening the meeting; (2) using a brief but focused anonymous feedback form at the conclusion of the meeting to test for candor and openness; (3) assuring that feedback loops are complete and that the absent managers are briefed both pre- and post- meeting on intent and outcomes.

The use of video-taped interviews to record, review, and renew employee engagement is a creative and helpful way to “jump-start” skip-level meetings. As unlikely as this may seem as a means to foster open communication and deepen employee commitment, paradoxically, if handled properly, it is a powerful catalyst for new insight and change. Input is captured on video-tape from invited participants, in private, individual conversations. Edited video clips are then used in the skip-level meeting to illustrate a range of responses and concerns to one or more specific issues. Their use demonstrates significant trust on the part of those recorded as the meeting launches and encourages others to be candid and open. The recorded documentation, only with the explicit permission of those interviewed, can then be subsequently used in dialogue with direct managers as well as others. With one client organization, we interviewed first-line supervisors and project leaders who had had little previous dialogue with the senior leadership team. This methodology reinforces what the inquiry is about – engaging employees and deepening their commitment to optimize organizational performance.

**Barrier-Busting by Managers** is a difficult behavioral adjustment, which many leaders do not know how to achieve. One of the most powerful indicators that management can give to truly help employees realize their full potential is for managers to work at removing the obstacles or barriers technical people encounter when doing what they need and love to do. Rather than relentless demands for delivering “up” on new deliverables and new deadlines, help release employees to do what they must accomplish to deliver on their goals. This requires substantial inquiry and discussion of management “blind spots”. In our experience the rhetoric is present but the behavior prominently lacking with many senior leaders. This requires managers to balance burgeoning demands and last minute requests with a clearly defined strategy against which stated objectives and targets are prioritized. Protecting your most valued technical talent from relentless management requests is a skill, a political skill, which can be learned. When practiced, it elicits powerful results.

There are many ways to do “barrier-busting”. An example that made a difference is all about meetings - scheduled, extended, postponed, curtailed, ad hoc convening. Without question the most frequently recurring frustration we hear from technical professionals is not only the amount of time spent in meetings, but also the unpredictable and continually variable way in which meetings are convened (or not). Without realizing the impact, senior management is often disrespectful though largely oblivious to what it feels like to be continually “on call.” as one technical leader described his feelings. It’s difficult for many managers to imagine that productivity would indeed increase if there was more regard for the respective scheduling priorities of different segments of the organization. This is the issue that one leadership group tackled - the always burdensome issue of time management, particularly as related to convening and adjourning meetings in a predictable way. As a result, we were asked to design a function-wide training module for technical leaders and management called “Leadership as Facilitation” to establish new norms and meeting protocols throughout the organization.

#### **Four ways of practicing skilled inquiry:**

1. Listening Posts
2. Cascading Conversations
3. Skip-Level Meetings
4. Barrier-Busting by Managers

It is important to conduct the inquiry in a manner that is congruent with the desire to foster deeper commitment and more passionate engagement with the challenges at hand.

The benefits of such skilled inquiry are numerous, including acknowledgment of the political implications of the question itself. By engaging in skilled inquiry, clients with whom we have worked identified outdated protocols and processes, which hindered decision-making in a timely way. They have created more robust feedback loops, which identified, for example, substantial gaps in how the R&D pipeline was managed. One specific client realized that productivity at the early stages of the R&D pipeline was accelerating in a way that was, in fact, causing a bottleneck later in the pipeline where resources were severely stressed and strained. Failure to inquire systemically into the drivers for high performance resulted in disequilibrium in the system that was only being perpetuated. Variables in the system were identified and addressed because management thoughtfully inquired about what was de-motivating and stressing employees. Productivity became more balanced across the span of the research and development life-cycle.

### **Engagement and the Politics of Creativity™**

We have discussed four reasons why the answers to the questions about R&D performance and employee potential are inherently political. We have also shared four ways leaders might facilitate skillful inquiry into the question, which persistently recurs in discussion about constrained resources and optimizing performance in tough times. To support skillful inquiry and facilitate the *modeling* of effective engagement by leaders, we have developed and use an assessment tool as part

of our larger framework for leadership collaboration and development in R&D. Known as the Politics of Creativity™, we look at four specific domains for action with accompanying principles, tools, and practices. The purpose is to uncover the cultural and behavioral practices that lie just beneath the surface in most organizations, which have more impact on performance than is readily acknowledged. The assessment tool specifically addresses some of the more political aspects of innovation.

We turn now to a brief discussion of how to use this assessment to build trust and establish credibility when striving to optimize innovative productivity, whether focusing explicitly on employee potential or otherwise.

A recent study published by the Conference Board identifies eight major drivers for employee engagement based on a detailed analysis of twelve major research studies.\* They are:

1. Pride About the Company
2. Coworkers/Team Members
3. Employee Development
4. Personal Relationship with One's Manager
5. Trust and Integrity

There is a strong correlation between the factors we inquire about in the Politics of Creativity Assessment and the recent Conference Board Study cited above. To cite but a few examples:

6. Nature of the Job
7. Line-of-Sight Between Individual Performance and Company Performance
8. Career Growth Opportunities

Good leaders can win employee attention effectively by asking explicitly the questions, which often get pushed under the table or are simply ignored because they are too “hot” to ask in any familiar organizational setting. Remember Peter Block’s assertion: “In fact, the first rule of politics is that nobody will tell you the rules”.

The goal of the Politics of Creativity framework is not merely to ask questions but to provide a “safe” occasion for valued and skillful technical professionals to address some of the more subtle and difficult issues, which are indeed political – because they involve the necessary exercise of power and control to achieve desired ends. The Politics of Creativity Assessment provides a snapshot of the attributes of organizational culture, which leaders may not be cognizant of because they are highly-charged politically.

Paying attention to these and participating in active facilitated dialogue is critical for innovation to flourish, most especially when times are tough and people are scared.

<b>Employee Development:</b>						
My work is challenging, engaging my full attention and commitment.						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree					strongly agree	
<b>Trust and Integrity:</b>						
Our organization is reluctant to deliver bad news to upper management.						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree					strongly agree	
<b>Line-of-Sight Between Individual Performance and Company Performance:</b>						
Decisions are based more on managerial influence than science in our organization.						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree					strongly agree	
<b>Career Growth Opportunities:</b>						
Raising tough questions will not adversely affect my career.						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
strongly disagree					strongly agree	

\* “Employee Engagement: A Review of Current Research and Its Implications,” by John Gibbons, The Conference Board, NYC, 2006.

Yes, there remains a place for assessment and surveys, when thoughtfully positioned and effectively integrated into a larger learning context. As we have demonstrated throughout this discussion, there are indeed political implications to the questions asked about performance and potential, whether we are aware of it or not. The Politics of Creativity framework combines skilled inquiry and requisite dialogue to generate more authentic engagement around difficult issues – issues that need to be addressed now more than ever. Surveys alone are never the answer when wanting to tap into the potential of those employees who have survived right-sizing, down-sizing, and the relentless demands to do more with less; authentic engagement is what's required.

Managers motivate. Leaders inspire. One without the other is incomplete when striving for sustainable performance. AND, no matter how powerful or forceful one might be, a leader cannot force you to commit nor compel you to create. When times are tough, the need for the spirit to be sustained and nurtured does not vanish. Both **“perspire”** and **“inspire”** as well as **“expire”** for that matter are rooted in the Latin “spiritus” which means “to breathe in new life, to animate or energize”. Innovation requires inspiration as well as perspiration! The earnest manager might well cite Thomas Edison when it comes to working harder. “Success is 10% inspiration and 90%

perspiration.” Edison’s statement describes what is required to move a creative idea forward to an invention, and then perhaps an innovation, where real socio-economic value has been established. He is not addressing what is required to invite and sustain a creative work environment, which is animated and inspired, even when times are tough. People who are managed by others need more than admonitions to do more, faster, with less.

Our intent in this paper is not to provide the *answers* for generating and assuring high performance in a specific R&D organization. Rather we focus on the political nature of the inquiry itself and how it dictates responses that will either deepen employee engagement in the very process or disrupt it further, with the risk of compromising further dedication to the tasks at hand. While the question will always remain, the answers will vary. A leader must be willing to probe beneath the clichés and comfortable behaviors to reach for innovation, balancing perspiration with inspiration. The goal is to invite passionate commitment beyond compliance. Attempts to encourage employees to be more innovative as well as productive inevitably bump up against the needs for direction and control in a complex business environment. The political skill required to optimize R&D performance in this environment requires leaders who inspire by the way they inquire.

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