Gaining Employee Commitment in Tough Times: Performance and Potential in R&D Today

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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 asked often in these tough times, when resources are so strained; and it lies not far beneath the surface of many management discussions.

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 then review four ways of practicing "skillful inquiry" to optimize employee engagement in the process. The political nature of the inquiry about performance and potential, both individual and organizational, will either deepen employee engagement in the process of inquiry or perpetuate more cynicism and distrust. The goal is to inspire by the way one inquires.

"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 with more than twenty years experience in her company's basic research function. Ironically, and sadly, as the pressure to deliver new value in R&D 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, break-through 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.

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. It is subject to misunderstanding and can readily become de-motivating, 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, 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 one 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 remainder 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 connotations 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.

underlying assumptions explicit and holds open 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 there is about the criteria for "high performance,"

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 functions' 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.

Making changes in organizations in a way that maintains support from those around us is what political skill is all about.

This is no less true in R&D, where the drive for discovery and commercialization is more intense than ever.

Over twenty years ago, Peter Block, a respected organizational consultant, published The Empowered Manager, Positive Political Skills at Work (Jossey-Bass, 1987). 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" inhibits 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.

Returning 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

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!

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

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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 from other variables in the larger

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 very much 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 is difficult and can indeed be very "political."

The fourth factor which makes any answer to questions of performance and potential "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.

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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 discussion 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.

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.

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.

Chris Mallett, Corporate VP of R&D at Cargill, and his Global Technology Leadership Team, recently asked some 80 Cargill technology directors to study 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 disciplines 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.

> **Responses to questions of performance and potential are often political because:**
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> 1. Inadequate agreement on what high performance means;
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> 2. Systemic variables not sufficiently understood;
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> 3. Proven processes given priority over new ways of working;
>
> 4. Failure to value the importance of nurturing the human spirit

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.

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.

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, leaders need to work creatively to actively model innovation as well as engagement 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. 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, these practices have been validated as successful in engaging employees in more powerful ways.

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 the most challeng-

ing. Creating a "safe environment" where others feel acknowledged and heard is not a practice that most managers are particularly 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

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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. In 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 one felt most alive on the 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.

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 to provide a means by which lead-

ers can take a barometer reading of the vitality of an R&D organization's most valued resource, its people. A pre-determined set of questions about priority concerns frames the inquiry. Inhibitors to creativity and innovation as reflected in leadership practices and behavior, for example, might be explored. Interviews are conducted 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. An extended dialogue is facilitated for understanding in preparation for launching the cascading conversations.

All those initially interviewed are then invited, as the next step, to convene a conversation

Four ways of practicing skilled inquiry:

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

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, 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, in one organization 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 the intermediate 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-levels 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. For example, after interviewing first-line supervisors and project leaders, 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. Again, the means or the 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 be attentive to 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, managers practice attentiveness to releasing employees to do what they must accomplish to deliver on their goals. This requires substantial inquiry and discussion of management "blind spots;" often the rhetoric is present but the behavior is 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." One example: it's all about meetings - scheduled, extended, postponed, curtailed, ad hoc convening. The most frequently recurring frustration of 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. More focus on the concept of "Leadership as Facilitation" can bust barriers by establishing new norms and meeting protocols throughout the organization.

Listening Posts, Cascading Conversations, Skip-Level Meetings, Barrier-Busting by Managers – these are four ways for leaders to model the kind of engagement they seek to assess, conducting 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, *"Does the performance of our R&D pipeline reflect the full potential of our talent?"*

By engaging in skilled inquiry, organizations have identified outdated protocols and processes which hindered decision-making. They have created more robust feedback loops which identified, for example, substantial gaps in how the R&D pipeline was managed. One organization 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.

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Our intent in this paper is not to provide a formula 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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