

"IS there anyone who doesn't know Matt Wilte?" asked Alfred Smart, introducing the human resources person in charge of employee development. Not getting a response, he set the tone by saying very quickly, "Good. Go ahead, Matt."

Matt scanned the impassive faces, knowing they would not give him a break. Still, he loved the feeling. He was at the center of Moon Oil USA power, the decision-makers' attention on him. The giant corporation would move based on what he would say. "Gentlemen," he started. "I understand time is short today, so I'll plunge straight forward." He opened his leather-bound organizer and glanced down on his notes. "In an effort to learn what our employee attitude toward the coming downsizing might be and to understand how we might structure it differently from prior downsizings, we conducted a series of focus groups. Each group had eight employees who were randomly selected from across the organization and two facilitators from our human resources department. I was able to participate in or observe most of these focus-group meetings.

"From a human resources perspective, we wanted to develop alternative methods of staffing the new organization as well as possible alternatives to the ISP-VSP method of transition we used in the past. More specifically, we wanted alternatives to the time-consuming task of one-on-one interviewing by hiring managers, alternatives to the problem of multiple job offers to our more talented employees, and alternatives to the idea of paying our employees to voluntarily leave the company, a costly method which we believe results in a disproportionate loss of the best employees. We also included several questions in each session concerning our reward system to explore the pay-for-performance concept and attitudes toward the various bonus schemes that currently exist.

"Each group discussed six questions on staffing, three on reward, and one on transition. We were able to more precisely target the questions for each successive group using knowledge gleaned from the prior group."

He paused to survey his audience for questioning expressions before proceeding. "The results. The overwhelming common complaint regarded communication. They want to know what's happening every step of the way. This came across so clearly and so often that I'm convinced morale could be significantly improved through more open communication. Employees would rather hear bad news than no news. When we

focused more precisely on that issue, we learned that involving the employees in the process of designing and implementing the restructuring would virtually eliminate the general suspicion we have observed and would have the potential of avoiding subsequent complaints." Surveying the management committee, it was obvious they all grasped the significance of his first conclusion. "I'll have some specific recommendations on communication after I've outlined all our findings.

"With regard to staffing, we learned the employees want to retain the job-posting system. They want to tell us which jobs they are interested in and to know they were considered for those jobs. The next focus groups will explore the idea of candidate selection by committee without interviews. It would seem employees are willing to be considered on the basis of past performance as indicated on their yearly evaluations. They don't see the one-on-one interview as productive. The implications for savings here are tremendous." He looked around the table again at a more relaxed management committee.

"Concerning the reward system, they generally favor additional pay for good performance but are suspicious of any scheme which reduces base pay.

"Transition. The results here were totally opposed to anything we would have predicted. Employees don't feel extra incentive should be offered to entice them to voluntarily leave the company. They think such a system encourages the best employees to leave and reduces the quality of our workforce. In other words, they don't want a voluntary separation package. On the topic of outsourcing, they don't want employees who get jobs with the outside company to also get the separation package. They don't want to see the double dipping that occurred in the past. Again, we'll explore that more closely in coming groups.

"Recommendations . . ." At hearing Parsly clear his throat, Wilte yielded the floor.

"Excuse the interruption," began Parsly, "but you seem to be saying our employees' first concern is for the company, that they're putting the company ahead of what could be in their own personal best interests. Is that a fair statement?"

"More than fair, Sir. It appears the employees, if left to design a restructuring on their own, would be more focused on the best interests of the company than would we.

Furthermore, they would rather the company decide who stays and who is let go than decide for themselves."

"Incredible. Are your specific recommendations contained in your report?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Excellent job, Matt. Sorry to rush you out, but we've an impossible schedule today. Continue on as you've planned. We may make some suggestions to you through Alfred."

Wilde gathered his material and hurried out of the boardroom. He did not take offense at being dismissed so summarily, but he wished he could somehow observe the working session that would follow. Like most ambitious individuals in corporate America, he could only guess at what went on behind closed boardroom doors when no one below Vice President was in the room. John McCall was about to get his first look at that rarest of clubs.

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"THANKS for making time to see me, Matt," said McCall, greeting his visitor at the door with a handshake.

"No problem, John. And sincere congratulations on the promotion. They needed an innovative thinker." Wilde never forgot the way McCall had outsmarted him during a team-building role-play.

"Thanks again. Sit down. I've only got a few minutes, but I need to understand these focus groups you've been conducting."

"Fire away."

"Well, I'm having trouble accepting that our employees, or anyone else, would act in a way contrary to their own best interests. It doesn't happen. The whole economy would collapse."

"The old invisible-hand theory?"

"I don't think there's an argument against it, anymore. It's the way of the world."

"Maybe, but, so what?"

"The so what is that you're reporting exactly what the management committee wants to hear. Worse yet, it's better than they wanted to hear. There's no way our

employees will put the company before their own best interests. There has to be a flaw in your focus-group methodology."

"I'm afraid not, John. Look, it surprised us, too. Remember, I have a Ph.D. in Organizational Psychology. I followed the rules. Trust me. I know how to construct an unbiased focus-group study. They really do feel that way. We have two of the groups on tape if you'd like to observe them."

"That won't be necessary. Let me summarize this thing so there's no misunderstanding, Matt. You stand by your findings that the employees don't want the option of accepting a lucrative voluntary separation package to encourage them to leave the company, that they don't want to be able to collect a separation package and then go straight to work for an outsource company doing the same jobs, that they would prefer the company decide who stays and who goes rather than decide for themselves, and that they prefer the new organization be staffed without interviewing?"

"Yes, John. I know it sounds . . ."

"Unbelievable," supplied McCall.

"Unlikely. But Moon Oil people are loyal to this company."

"More so than they are to their own families or to themselves? You're trying to say, for example, that an accountant whose job is to be outsourced to a contractor and who will be leaving this company to work for that contractor would prefer to forego a \$50,000 severance check out of loyalty to the company that's letting him go?"

"What do you expect me to say?"

"Listen, Matt. My only caution to you, as a friend, is this: be prepared to document and prove those findings when the time comes. Even then, the best you can hope is to be able to prove you didn't deliberately mislead the committee."

"Now, just a minute, John. Are you suggesting . . ."

"I'm not suggesting anything. I'm flat out stating a basic fact of human nature, a fact that accounts for the survival of the human race. People act in their own best interests. In order for what you're saying to be true, our employees would have to believe that they themselves will not be separated from the company. Do you see what I'm saying? The only people who would respond the way you say our employees are

responding are people who think their individual jobs are safe, that they, themselves, will not be separated."

"I see your point. Are you asking if we rigged the focus groups to include only employees who would logically be staying in the new organization?"

"No. I'm not accusing you, but . . ." McCall stopped in mid sentence. He paused to think before exploring further. "The management committee was drooling all over themselves after you left yesterday's meeting. They'll act on your findings. There'll be wholesale dismissals of a lot of loyal, long-time employees from this company in very short order if you don't change your recommendations."

"Are you asking me to falsify my findings?"

McCall heard the fake, politically correct tone he had come to despise. He had his answer. Matt Wilte was, after all, a Ph.D. in Organizational Psychology. He knew much better than McCall that the conclusions contained in his report were completely contrary to every known economic and psychological principle. He had somehow stacked the focus groups, constructed the questions, and subtly reinforced certain answers in order to obtain predetermined and planned results. He would not dare engage in such a criminal farce unless he was under the direction of someone in power. "Have you ever spoken directly to Lord Debauchton?" accused McCall.

Caught off guard by the question, Wilte was confused. He had naturally assumed McCall was in on it when Alfred Smart instructed him. He stammered before starting his answer. "No, never . . ."

"Get out of my office," demanded McCall's interruption. He stood in anger to insist and found himself smiling.

Wilde got up and walked out in total confusion.

McCall realized the Prozac allowed him to smile through such a stressful situation. Sitting down to review it, he determined he had said everything he wanted to say, had probed for and found his answer, and had told Wilte where he stood. The only difference he could attribute to the drug was that he felt good about it rather than frustrated and angry. He wondered how he had ever gone without it. He would take added confidence to his next meeting.

