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Passion versus Obsession
Volume Six

"*The Power of Pull* examines the 'how question'—how can we effectively address our most pressing challenges in a rapidly changing and increasingly interdependent world? In *The Power of Pull*, John Hagel, John Seely Brown, and Lang Davison highlight fascinating new ways in which passionate thinking, creative solutions, and committed action can—and will—make it possible for us to seize opportunities and remain in step with change." - [Bill Clinton](#)

"*The Power of Pull* will do for our 21st-century information-age institutional leadership what Peter Drucker's *The Concept of the Corporation* did for industrial-era management. This book begins to create a body of learnable principles that will revolutionize our ability to access and work with knowledge flows." - [Newt Gingrich](#)

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Passion versus Obsession

When I was a little boy, I was obsessed with chemistry. I had a chemistry lab in my home and I could not wait to retreat to my little lab and conduct the most amazing experiments, exploring all kinds of permutations of chemical mixtures. When I was not in my lab, I was devouring chemistry textbooks. People said I was passionate about chemistry, but they were wrong – I was obsessed. I was using chemistry as an escape from a very difficult childhood. It was a survival mechanism, not a means to achieve my full potential.

We are all familiar with cautionary tales of people so consumed by their passions that they lose their social standing, meaningful relationships, and—ultimately—their mind. Their professional and social lives fall apart as obsession grips their every waking hour, crowding everything else out. It's no wonder people fear passion.

What makes this distinction confusing is that passion and obsession exhibit very similar behaviors.

In a previous essay, I asked the open question, “When does passion become obsession?”, touching upon the possibility of destructive passion—when passion leads to fixation and dysfunction. Having thought about this more, I think I was asking the wrong question.

To say passion becomes obsession is to make a distinction of degree. It implies that obsession is a more passionate form of passion—too much of a good thing. However, I'm now convinced that passion and obsession do not vary in degree, but in kind. In fact, in many ways they are opposite.

What makes this distinction confusing is that passion and obsession exhibit very similar behaviors.

Both passion and obsession are generated within and manifest in outward action or pursuit, which can provide purpose and direction. Passions and obsessions are powerful motivators to take risks,

to make sacrifices and step outside of conventional norms to achieve what we desire. Most importantly, passion and obsession burn within us irrespective of extrinsic encouragement or rewards. This can lead to what traditional institutions perceive to be subversive or rebellious behavior, driving passionate and obsessive people to the edges of organizations and society. It is on the edge that the crucial distinctions between passion and obsession become clear.

Pulled to the edge versus pushed to the edge

The first significant difference between passion and obsession is the role free will plays in each disposition: passionate people fight their way willingly to the edge to find places where they can pursue their passions more freely, while obsessive people (at best) passively drift there or (at worst) are exiled there.

The degree to which free will plays a role in determining who winds up on the edge, will greatly determine their capacity to succeed in this challenging environment.

Sense of self: Achieving potential versus compensating for inadequacy

Passionate people find edges exciting because they have a rooted sense of self. As I discussed in a previous post, passion inspires creation.

Creators have a strong and meaningful sense of identity—defined not by what they consume (which has little or false expressive potential) but by what they make (total self-expression).

When I say that they have a “rooted sense of self,” however, I don’t mean to imply that their identity is fixed. On the contrary, as creators, passionate people are invested in constant personal, professional and creative growth. They want to develop

and diversify their talents in order to keep their creations innovative and their passion dynamic, sustainable and alive.

Through the challenge of creation, and the innovative disposition demanded by the ever-shifting edge, passionate people expand their personal boundaries, helping them to more effectively achieve their potential. In other words: passion gives us the energy and motivation to work hard—and joyfully.

When I consider the drive of passionate creatives, I'm reminded of this observation by Ortega y Gasset:

The most radical division that is possible to make of humanity is that which splits it into two classes of creatures: those who make great demands of themselves, piling up difficulties and duties; and those who demand nothing special of themselves,

but for whom to live is to be every moment what they already are; without imposing on themselves any effort toward perfection; mere buoys that float on the waves... The few individuals we have come across who are capable of a spontaneous and joyous effort stand out isolated... These are the select men, the noble ones, the only ones who are active and not merely reactive, for whom life is a perpetual striving.

It requires a passionate person to generate the strength and enthusiasm to apply the effort needed to achieve and create, which requires they "make great demands of themselves." Whatever the subject of passion and creation, it is the capacity to direct that energy into actions that reinforce personal growth, which makes the passionate people thrive on the edge.

An obsessive person is what Gasset would call a "buoy on the water." Obsessives have a very weak

sense of identity because they displace their sense of self into the very object of their obsession (this becomes a strange form of self-obsession, which is why obsessive tendencies are frequently associated with narcissism). Obsession, far from the joyful effort and striving inspired by passion, is a strategy of escape. In conflating their identity with an object of fascination, obsessives are not only able to forget their inner-self, they are able to insulate from the challenging world around them.

The obsessive person's focus is narrow because they are less interested in complex growth than singular direction. Obsessive personalities may be driven to create, but the inner growth needed to be a sustained creator is undermined by their lack of determination to grow as people. As a result, rather than realizing their potential, they are concerned with finding a way to stay focused and compensate for inadequacy.

Breadth of focus: Narrow objects versus broad subjects

It's not an accident that we speak of an "object of obsession," but the "subject of passion." That's because obsession tends towards highly specific focal points or goals, whereas passion is oriented toward networked, diversified spaces. Objects of obsession are often quite narrow, for example using a specific photo editing tool, developing enhancements to a specific product or developing new art around a specific pop culture character or icon.

Subjects of passion, on the other hand, are broad, for example involving digital photography, innovating within a broader category of technology or experimenting with a certain genre of pop culture. Given this broader focus, passionate people thrive on knowledge flows to stimulate innovation, achievement and growth. The subjects of passion invite and even demand connections with others who share the passion.

Relationships: Expanding versus contracting

Because passionate people are driven to create as a way to grow and achieve their potential, they are constantly seeking out others who share their passion in a quest for collaboration, friction and inspiration. Because they have a strong sense of self, passionate people are well-equipped to form relationships. They present themselves in ways that invite trust – they have little time for pretense and they are willing to express vulnerability and need in order to receive the help they need in achieving their own potential. Because they are passionate, they are willing to share their own knowledge and experience when they encounter someone sharing their passion. They are also intensely curious, seeking to understand the other passionate people they encounter in order to better see where and how they can collaborate to get better faster.

In contrast, obsessive people hide behind their objects of obsession. The objects are what are

important, not others or even themselves. As a result, obsessive people are hard to get to know and trust—they share little of themselves and they exhibit minimal interest or curiosity regarding the needs or feelings of others. One of the hallmarks of obsessive people is that they tend to talk endlessly and often repetitively about the same thing, rarely inviting commentary or reaction from others, and ultimately pushing others away with their obsessive rants.

The key difference between passion and obsession is fundamentally social: passion helps build relationships and obsession inhibits them. This becomes a key marker to differentiate between passion and obsession: is the person developing richer and broader relationships or is the person undermining existing relationships and finding it difficult to form new relationships?

A final note: Passion and neurosis

Passion creates options while obsession closes options. Passion reaches outward while obsession pulls inward. Passion positions us to pursue the opportunities created by the Big Shift while obsession makes us oblivious to the expanding opportunities around us.

I was inspired to expand upon this passion vs. obsession distinction because many people object to my advocacy of passion by citing examples of great scientists, artists and thinkers who, while certainly passionate, appear to have been reclusive, neurotic and unhappy.

Lionel Trilling does an admirable job of addressing this issue in his essay, "Art and Neurosis." Crudely put, Trilling argues that all of us have "issues," and it is only because great men and women are visible to the public that theirs are on display, creating the illusion that they have more than most of us

(this, of course, rests on the second myth that there is such a thing as "normal people" without problems).

But far from being inundated with neurosis or "issues," what sets these great men and women apart is their ability to transform shortcomings into strengths, or compensate for them by excelling in other areas.

Trilling cites a short essay by Charles Lamb, called "The Sanity of True Genius." Lamb points out that what we call genius or excellence, "manifests itself in the admirable balance of all the faculties," while unhealthy psychological behavior (in Lamb's words, "madness") is characterized by the "disproportionate straining or excess of any one of them." Lamb goes on to point out that those who can't master their inner demons, do not create, which implies shaping and consistency. Their imaginations are not active—for to be active is to call something

into act and form—but passive, as men in sick dreams.

Agreeing with this, Trilling concludes:

Of the artist we must say that whatever elements of neurosis he has in common with his fellow mortals, the one part of him that is healthy, by any conceivable definition of health, is that which gives him the power to conceive, to plan, to work, and to bring his work to a conclusion (“Art and Neurosis,” The Moral Obligation to Be Intelligent, p. 103). Over the years, as I moved into more supportive

environments, my obsession with chemistry dissipated. I began to discover a passion for technology and business. That passion in turn led me to reach out to others, at first through writing and then through weaving an ever richer network of personal relationships. It has been a long journey and it is far from over, but it has taught me that obsession confines while passion liberates. To cultivate passion, to channel its energy into self-determination, inter-personal connections and regenerative curiosity, and finally to find the balance needed to sustain creativity on the edge, is much more than health—it is happiness.

A Labor Day Manifesto for the New World

We speak on behalf of the creatives who are passionate about their work. They experience deep frustration today with the institutional barriers that have been put in their way as they seek to more effectively achieve their full potential. They want and need platforms that can help them connect with others and drive performance to new levels. They are articulate about their frustrations and needs, but they are often so consumed by their current initiatives that they rarely find a collective voice to express their broader interests.

Who are passionate creatives?

Passionate creatives exist everywhere. They are not bound by geography, job classification, institutional affiliations or demographic categories – they can be found anywhere from the frontlines of the largest organizations to the garages where entrepreneurs are preparing to unleash the next wave of innovation. These are certainly not just knowledge workers. They include mechanics who

are passionate about the machines they service, gardeners who see art where others only see plants, retail clothing sales staff who can see the inner person and help them to express it through their clothes and craftspeople who see something amazing in the most mundane raw materials. They also include customers who are not satisfied to take products as given to them, but see the opportunity to make so much more with the products they find. What unites them is the desire to make a difference, to leave the world a better place than they found it and to engage with those who share their passion so that they can get better faster.

These individuals go by many names. Some have adopted the label of pro-amateurs (or “pro-ams”), popularized by Charles Leadbeater, but this label typically refers to amateurs who adopt and pursue professional standards in their pursuit of their passion. We seek to include those of us fortunate enough to be compensated for work we are

passionate about, whether we are entrepreneurs, professionals, knowledge workers, craftspeople or clerical workers who are searching for new and creative ways to do the most “routine” tasks. Of course, these individuals have been around since the beginning of human history and played a more prominent role in some eras than in others. Our goal is to expand their ranks and position them firmly in the center of the institutions that shape our professional and personal lives.

Passionate creatives are everywhere among us, but they are not evenly distributed. They tend to gather on the edges where unmet needs intersect with unexploited capabilities. Edges are fertile seedbeds for innovation. These edges include emerging economies like China, India and Singapore that are beginning to encourage individuals to pursue their passion. Other edges include demographic segments like younger generations coming into markets and the workforce with new

sets of needs and interests. Edges also arise around the frontiers of technology, whether it is information technology, clean tech, nanotech or biotech. Edges naturally tend to become spiky as passionate creatives seek out collaborators. In this quest, they gather together in dense geographic settlements to enhance their ability to find and encounter others they can learn from.

To be certain, not all people fall into this category. Many today are overwhelmed by the changes going on around them and seek stability, predictability and safety. They long for the time when they knew exactly what needed to be done and what could be expected when they did it. This is completely understandable—change can be perceived as very destabilizing and threatening—especially if we have very little and are struggling to hang on or if we have accumulated a lot and fear that we will lose it all.

But all of us have the potential to become passionate creatives and more and more will make the transition into this growing cohort. We all have the capacity to become passionate about some element of the vast world we live in and passion fosters creation, especially if we have the discipline to master the practices required to drive performance to new levels. Passion fosters new dispositions—it not only welcomes new challenges, it actively seeks them out. It takes challenges and transforms them into opportunities to develop new skills and perspectives. It moves people from external incentives to intrinsic motivations. It consumes people with the desire to take the game to the next level. It merges personal and professional, intricately weaving the strands so that we can no longer tell the difference.

Many of us have suppressed our passions in an attempt to fit in and integrate ourselves into a world that expected stability, predictability and safety.

But they remain in the margins of our lives or in the daydreams that distract us from our daily tasks. Our challenge is to re-discover and cultivate them, moving them from the margins into the center of our lives. We must all make our passions our professions—they will help to focus us and energize us in a world where those without passion will be increasingly marginalized and overwhelmed by mounting pressures.

The Big Shift and the opportunities it creates

Why will more and more people evolve into passionate creatives? Because we live in a world that is shifting inexorably from an obsession with efficiency to an obsession with learning. We have come to call this the Big Shift. It is being driven by long-term changes in our technology and public policy infrastructures. These catalysts in turn generate richer and more prolific knowledge flows around the world. Eventually these knowledge flows get harnessed in creation spaces that offer the poten-

tial for increasing returns—the more participants that join these spaces, the richer the performance and learning improvement opportunities.

We initially experience this shift in terms of mounting pressure as competition intensifies on a global scale. But, for those of us already pursuing our passions, this world is enormously liberating because it challenges us to become even better. It also provides us with many of the resources required for this effort. It creates opportunities to unleash our passions, leverage them and scale them in ways never before possible. It gives us opportunities to create and make a difference in ways that we never could before.

Those of us pursuing our passions as our professions will move quickly to address the opportunities created by these new infrastructures, participating in richer and more diverse knowledge flows and challenging each other to new levels of

performance. Our success and profound joy will become beacons for the others who have kept their passions bottled up, hidden from sight and far removed from their daily tasks. From another direction, the growing pressures on those who struggle to succeed in the absence of passion will become unbearable and ultimately create a crisis challenging their most basic beliefs.

But there is an even more profound factor driving the growth of this category. At a very basic level, to be human is to be a passionate creative. That is what all of us were meant to be, even though many religions and political movements over the centuries have sought to channel or even deny this basic human need. We live in societies that, often with the best of intentions (and unfortunately occasionally with the worst of intentions), sought to socialize us into a very different mold. But many of those societies have been disintegrating over the past several decades as technology and public

policy infrastructures challenge and undermine the foundations of those societies. Our true nature as human beings will ultimately prevail, aided by the changes going on around us.

The journey to engage our existing institutions

But the journey will not be easy. This group of individuals today still faces enormous obstacles in pursuing its passions. While our infrastructures are transforming at a rapid pace, the institutions around us are increasingly at odds with these new infrastructures. Most of the institutions that we must deal with, whether they are schools, firms, non-profits or government bodies, emerged and were shaped in a previous era, driven by earlier technology infrastructures. These communication and transportation infrastructures rewarded scalable efficiency and we responded accordingly. The great institutional leaders of the twentieth century enjoyed enormous success and widespread impact as they mastered the practices and institutional

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architectures required to deliver scalable efficiency. But, in the process, we paid an enormous price. We discovered that scalable efficiency expected all of us to integrate into these new institutional homes by performing highly standardized tasks that were repeatable and highly predictable.

That integration led most of us to suppress our passions. We were taught to treat our work as a price to be paid to accumulate the material resources required to enjoy the rest of our lives. Passion in the workplace became highly suspect. Passionate people do not follow standardized scripts well, they are constantly seeking to impro-

wise, challenge conventional wisdom and strike out on new and unexpected paths. Passionate people are not predictable and, as a result, undermine determined efforts to ensure predictability. These individuals also detest the organizational politics that pervade these institutions as many in the hierarchy begin to focus on hoarding and protecting limited resources.

As a result, we often tend to be deeply unhappy in our current institutions. We are profoundly frustrated by the daily obstacles that we encounter at every turn. We see all the possibilities, but experience firsthand the barriers that keep these possibilities far out on the horizon rather than within our grasp. Well-meaning mentors advise us to get with the program and embrace the institutional agenda even if it means leaving our passion at the door every morning as we report for work. We quickly learn that our passions are viewed as deeply subversive, rather than as treasured assets.

As a consequence, many of us have fled these institutions and learned to build independent platforms that are more suitable for pursuing the work that we love. Others remain in our institutional homes, struggling to make a difference against enormous pressure.

While this battle can seem to be overwhelming in the short-term, we can draw hope and inspiration from one inescapable fact. Our current institutional homes will have to change. Performance pressures will continue to mount, driven by the broad deployment of new technology and public policy infrastructures. In this environment, our institutions will be forced to change or fall by the wayside as a new generation of institutions emerges, designed specifically to exploit the unprecedented opportunities created by new infrastructures. The recently released Shift Index provides compelling quantitative evidence that the current approaches to scalable efficiency in our institutions are no longer

working – performance has been deteriorating at an alarming rate over decades. Institutions are experiencing unmet needs (for new ways to create value and drive performance to unprecedented levels) and passionate creatives will become powerful catalysts for institutional transformation, whether they remain within the institution itself or are now outside the institutional boundaries, operating on the periphery in various roles. Major organizational change initiatives rarely succeed without a clear and present threat. That threat is now very present for those who care to look.

The opportunity for institutional innovation

True to form, passionate creatives will not sit still for long, complaining about the impediments that stand in their way. This manifesto is not directed at the barriers holding us back. It is a call to action – seeking to mobilize individuals within this group to address the opportunity ahead. Given the new infrastructures emerging around us, we have an

unprecedented opportunity to engage in a new form of innovation. Product and process innovation are still valuable, but they are inevitably limited in scope and potential as long as they are pursued within existing institutional arrangements.

To thrive and to draw others into our camp, we need to find ways to re-think our institutional architectures – the roles and relationships that define how institutions function – in ways that amplify our efforts to get better faster. Rather than treating us as irritants to be neutralized, institutions must be redesigned from the ground up to address a totally different rationale. Instead of pursuing scalable efficiency, institutions must learn how to pursue scalable peer learning. Said differently, institutions must find ways to make talent development the core rationale for their existence. Everything about these institutions – strategy, operations and organization – will need to be re-conceived through this talent development lens. As

this rationale focuses our efforts to craft a new set of institutional arrangements, we will move from the edges of our institutions to their core.

We must make this long and difficult march through our institutions. Without it, we will be forever limited in terms of the scope of our learning and our impact. Properly configured, institutions can provide extraordinary platforms to amplify and accelerate our individual efforts. Without these institutional platforms we will surely still make a difference, but the difference will be far more contained.

This long march will begin at the edges of our existing institutions and on the edges of our world—those edges where unmet needs first encounter unexploited opportunities. We will find ways to catalyze new institutional arrangements first where the need is most pronounced. Our existing institutions are largely helpless to participate in the

emerging growth opportunities spawned on the edges of our world. Yet, they must find ways to redeploy resources from their core to these edges if they are ever going to effectively respond to growing profit pressure in the core. We can find ways to help lead our institutions to these edges.

At these edges, we will find more receptivity to institutional innovations that help to effectively target the growth opportunities emerging there. We will also master new practices that can help make these institutional initiatives even more impactful. These pull techniques—accessing resources, attracting resources and achieving our full potential—are already used by many of us, but in a very limited and fragmented way. As we engage on the edge, we will find that we are applying these techniques in much more systematic and creative ways. The growing impact on the edge will position us to draw more and more resources out of the core and onto relevant edges. New institutional forms will evolve rapidly, enhanced by a new set of individual

practices that make passionate creatives even more successful.

Coming together to make a difference

To accomplish all of this, passionate creatives everywhere must find each other and join forces to expand our impact. It is time to move from the margins of our institutions to the core. It will be a long and difficult journey but all we have to lose are our institutional chains. The path is clear – we now have an opportunity to move from passion to profession to periphery and finally to potential.

There is so much potential—we need all the leverage that we can mobilize to achieve our full potential. Without appropriate institutions, we will forever remain limited in our ability to achieve impact. We have already begun to pursue institutional innovation on the edge of our existing institutions, in areas as diverse as the Creative Commons, open source software, extreme sports

and motorcycle design in China. These innovations give an early indication of the opportunity ahead. But imagine what could be accomplished if we mobilize the vast resources residing within our existing institutions.

We need to move forward and engage the institutions around us. And the institutions have more and more need to listen to us. Twentieth century institutions are not succeeding in the twenty-first century as new infrastructures take hold. They must change or they will slowly shrink into shadows of what they once were and make way for a new generation of institutions more suited to the harnessing the potential of these new infrastructures. With the right effort, we can turn these institutions from prisons to creation platforms and achieve the potential that we have long dreamed about, both for ourselves as individuals and for the institutions that support us.

Endorsements for *The Power of Pull*

"The authors have given us a provocative and insightful look at the power of today's knowledge flow. If you want to meet the challenges of working and living in the 21st century, this book should be your guide." - [Eric Schmidt](#), *Board Chairman and CEO of Google*

"*The Power of Pull* is a roadmap of how to get from where you are now to where you really want to be. Read it and be inspired. (You'll probably want to surf too.)" - [Marc Benioff](#), *CEO of Salesforce.com*

"*The Power of Pull* is a powerful new meme for navigating and networking in the 21st century. Any one of its 36 key questions (in the 'Bring It Home' sections) could change your life and the world." - [John Doerr](#), *Kleiner Perkins*

"In times of unprecedented change, we as individuals and institutions can have extraordinary

leverage and influence if we marshal the passion, knowledge and resources necessary to achieve great things. *The Power of Pull* empowers and guides us to make the most of today's enormous possibilities." - [John Naisbitt](#), *author of Megatrends*

"Stop whatever you are doing and read this amazing book. The authors totally nail it. Digging beneath the surface of stuff that distracts us on a daily basis, they unpack the deep forces that really truly matter and provide a guidebook each of us can use to unleash passion, transform how and why we work, and restore destiny and dignity to our lives." - [Richard Florida](#), *author of The Rise of the Creative Class and The Great Reset*

"This brilliant and exciting book shows how to pursue your passions by harnessing the power of networks. Success no longer comes from possessing knowledge; instead, you have to participate with others in creating a flow of knowledge. The

power of 'pull'—the ability to draw out people and resources for each endeavor—can transform both individuals and institutions." - [Walter Isaacson](#), *President and CEO, the Aspen Institute, and author of Einstein: His Life and Universe*

"Connecting many important threads through beautiful metaphors and wonderful narratives, the authors provide both a mind expanding view of how the world is changing and a solid framework and context to approach the future for anyone interested in surviving and enjoying it." - [Joichi Ito](#), *CEO of Creative Commons and Internet venture investor*

"We live in a global village, where borders are blurred, where all humanity could and should be responsible for the well-being of others. *The Power of Pull* proposes fresh insights that coalesce into a powerful way forward in this new world. This erudite manual for change is a testament to

the creativity and insight of its authors." - [Mark E. Tucker](#), *Former Group Chief Executive of Prudential plc, Member of the Court of the Bank of England*

"This is a seminal work that explores the personal and professional implications of a powerful convergence of technologies, ranging from in memory databases for speed, massive parallel processing in the cloud, access via telephone for anything, anytime, everywhere. We are just beginning to understand what this means for us. The authors help us to understand where and how pull will change our lives and our work given the new digital infrastructures re-shaping our landscape. It offers us a roadmap that we neglect at our peril." - [Hasso Plattner](#), *Founder and Chairman of SAP Supervisory Board*

About the authors



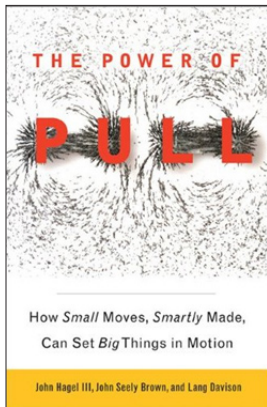
John Hagel III is the co-chairman of the Deloitte Center for the Edge. He is the author of a series of best-selling business books, including *Net Worth*, *Out of the Box* and *The Only Sustainable Edge*.



John Seely Brown is the independent co-chairman of the Deloitte Center for the Edge. He is co-author of the best-selling book *The Social Life of Information*.



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Volume Six: Passion versus Obsession

This volume consists of two blog postings from John Hagel and is part of a larger body of work that is discussed in the book, *The Power of Pull*. Other topics in this series include:

- Shaping Serendipity
- Pursuing Passion
- Talent: The Dilbert Paradox
- Three Levels of Pull
- From Passion to Potential

For more information and to read about these other topics, please visit:

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