

Chapter 16

An Epilogue

Because this picture of SRI has been a historical one, it has revealed little about SRI's present or future. As this account ends, then, it is a fair question to ask what part of SRI history best speaks to its future? What aspects of working here are worth preserving? What makes SRI a vital and exciting place to be...past, present, or future? In closing, I would like to identify, perhaps repeat, a few of its valued characteristics.

First, let's briefly address what SRI is not. It is not a top-down, profit-driven company that, if of a similar size, would be advancing a relatively few, centralized products or services that provide market value at a favorable price. Such companies, perhaps mistakenly, direct only a small fraction of their discretionary resources at renewal. While SRI's individual project or program efforts can sometimes have longevity, its focus on research and innovation means renewal is SRI's lifeblood.

Perhaps the best way to differentiate SRI from such companies is to view it as what its former name said it was, an institute. Semantically, the difference between a company and an institute is that a company is built to make a profit, whereas an institute is built around a cause. If SRI was and in practice still is an institute, what exactly is the cause it seeks to fulfill?

Asking that question around SRI would invite a host of opinions, but there is one, hopefully, about which most could agree. SRI exists to provide an environment or framework within which people who relish discovery and innovation can not only work, but thrive. That was true at its beginning and it remains true today. Over the 40 years or so I have been at SRI, I have listened to scores of people who have left, sometimes under less than ideal circumstances. After a time, they almost invariably come to miss the stimulation and excitement they felt at SRI while they were immersed in its intrinsic and ongoing cycles of innovation and project renewal.

From its independence and lack of endowments, SRI endures the same struggle for

financial viability as companies in the commercial marketplace. But in dealing with its own research marketplace, SRI has been bolstered by the diversity of many hundreds of individuals and project teams pursuing their separate opportunities. The motivations of those innovators and the opportunities they choose to pursue are largely self-generated, not something imposed from above.

Thus, for SRI to thrive as a whole, it needs to rely almost entirely on the initiative and innovation of those populating roughly its first three organizational levels. It is at these levels that ideas arise, external funding is sought, staff members are hired, and clients are satisfied. To be successful, two vital and complementary ingredients must exist in this environment. One is the presence of research leaders whose imagination and insight define new and better approaches to an opportunity. The other is a structure that provides the intellectual diversity and talent needed to carry out those approaches.

Overwhelmingly, it is project teams that are responsible for SRI contributions. But a research organization is compelled to be current. It therefore cannot afford to do without those individuals who also understand or—preferably—are helping create the state of the art in any discipline required. That currency and insight help guarantee innovative solutions. Accordingly, an important place exists at SRI for those principal investigators who are able to find sponsorship for extending or advancing their disciplines.

These varied opportunities presented by changing technologies, research insights, and new market-relevant problems are what constitute the excitement and vitality of SRI. SRI's work is embodied in the innovators who offer solutions never before tried, the banding together of the broad array of talent needed to carry out those solutions, and, last, the desire to prove to clients that their hope for a cost-effective, high-value solution was not misplaced. The process begins anew almost each and every day at SRI, providing excitement, challenge, apprehension, and

fulfillment. These adventures in the ongoing process of innovation are enormously strengthened by the objectivity and integrity inherent in the Institute's research ethics.

Most of those in the trenches at SRI will tell you that working here is not easy. Exhilarating perhaps, but not easy. Researchers at SRI epitomize self-determination as they discover or help discover their own futures. Whether acting alone or as part of a project team, they train

themselves to be responsible for both the genesis and completion of sponsored work, and above all to satisfy their clients and, in the process, themselves as well. Were it for commercial purposes alone, such research would, quite simply, be called entrepreneurial. Though it is difficult for me to know just how typical my long SRI experience has been, I think I know of SRI at its best. For me, it was indeed an exhilarating life shared with truly exciting and splendid people.