The creative tension exercise shows what happens when an organization strives to improve its level of performance. If an organization's performance doesn't constantly get better, the changing external environment will cause it to get worse. So organizations must constantly move toward their desired performance.

There are two parallel lines in the figure below. The bottom line represents the organization’s average current performance and the top line is where the organization wants the outcomes to be. The dots are placed in the figure to represent where leaders currently fall on the spectrum. Some leaders fall below the current performance line. Most will be right on or near the current performance line while some will be above the line.

The exercise shows that when leadership performance is framed in terms of moving toward the desired performance line, there will be anxiety in the organization. It becomes very clear that outside of the already high performers, the vast majority of people are not meeting the new desired performance.