

Session 2: Tensions

GOAL: During this session, your goal is to explore the concept of TENSIONS – what they are, how to frame them in a way that creates the greatest opportunity for growth, and what traps and pitfalls to watch out for.

WHAT TO DO:

1. Pick a leader.

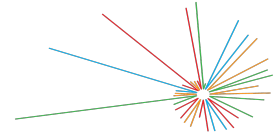
- Pick a team member to lead the session. You can have the same person who led the first session lead the second session, or you can rotate to give different people the chance to lead a session.
- The leader should prepare the agenda. A standard agenda is with the course materials on the Culture in Action website. You can use the standard as is or adapt it to your needs.
- The leader should read the “Leader Tips,” which are available on the Culture in Action website.

2. Get ready.

- The leader should schedule a 90-minute session, distribute this pdf (or a link to the website’s “Course Materials” page) to all participants, and let participants know whether they should submit their session prep before the meeting.
- All participants should spend 30 minutes or so prepping for the session.
 - First, they should do the pre-reading (below), which discusses TENSIONS.
 - Second, they should do the “Session Prep” (below), focusing on ACTION, STORY, and TENSIONS.
 - Review the ACTION(S) you agreed on at the first session. Have people done what they committed to do?
 - Think about one short, very specific, very recent STORY that shows the best of how you come together as a team to get things done.
 - Think about one TENSION – a place where there’s a gap between where your team is today and where you want to be – you’d like the team to discuss at the second session.

3. Go.

- Hold the session. Go through each of the practices in order. Hopefully, you’re getting a bit more comfortable with the seven practices. The leader can refer to the Leader Tips for help if you get stuck.
- Briefly review ACTIONS from the first meeting. The goal isn’t to do a full review on the substance – it’s to check on whether people are following through on the commitments they made during the first session.
- When you get to TENSIONS, spend a few minutes letting the group name the TENSION(S) they’d like to focus on, then pick one to focus on during the session. If you want, you can agree to discuss other TENSIONS in a different meeting or with a smaller group.
- Continue to pay attention to making sure every person has a chance to be heard.



Session 2: Pre-Reading

The first practice we will dive into is TENSIONS, since developing the ability to name and address TENSIONS lies at the core of Culture in Action's core objective of helping teams move forward to create more successful outcomes.

We're all accustomed to talking about problems: what's wrong, what we wish was different, what's missing.

TENSIONS are different. TENSIONS are the dynamic that exists between the current reality and the desired future state.

TENSIONS acknowledge that there's a reason why things are the way they. At the same time, TENSIONS name what we aspire to do, be, or have.

For example, for a team that's got more work than they feel they can accomplish, the difference could look like this:

Problem: We don't have the resources to do what we need to do.

TENSION: How might we get done what we need to do while also managing our costs so that we can meet street guidance/raise our next round/show funders we're using their donations cost-effectively?

TENSIONS may not need to be – or be capable of being – solved. Sometimes, we need to learn to have a healthy relationship with necessary TENSIONS, even when that's uncomfortable. For example, while you may solve a particular staffing/resourcing/spending problem, the fundamental TENSION between investing in necessary resources and living within a budget will rarely be "solved." Similar, work-life balance is a TENSION many people will choose to embrace ("How might I continually balance the sometimes competing demands of a family I love and work I love?") rather than solve, since solving the TENSION implies we've made our lives less full by eliminating or reducing our passion for one or the other aspect of our life.

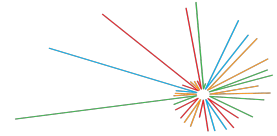
TENSIONS are the source of creativity, growth, and learning. Without TENSION, nothing changes. By paying attention to TENSION we deliberately evolve toward our best self or, for groups, toward our ideal culture.

We frame TENSIONS as a question that begins, "How might I/we..." because questions open up possibilities and generate the conditions for creativity and innovation. To use the example above, framing the issue as a problem shuts down creativity by stating something as a fact. If we don't have the resources to do what we need to do, we're trapped and doomed to fail. In contrast, framing the issue as a TENSION opens up creativity. For example:

- We could re-asses what "needs" to get done.
- We could re-think how fast it needs to get done.
- We could think about ways to get it done at a lower cost.
- We could think about ways to re-set expectations with investors/funders so they would be open to a faster/higher spend.

You can think of TENSIONS as a spectrum, with extreme outcomes at each end and a range of healthy choices in between. There's no "right" or "wrong" to where the team chooses to land within the spectrum – but it is important for the team to understand the pros, cons, and consequences of different choices and agree on what choice they are making.

For example, many teams must make tradeoffs between growth and risk management. Neither extreme (grow at all costs or avoid risk at all costs) is right, and there is no inevitable or universal answer to the question of risk tolerance. Yet understanding and getting aligned on the team's risk tolerance is crucial to avoid unproductive conflict, poor outcomes, and wasted energy.



The key to TENSIONS is to define them in a way that looks forward and draws people in. Problems often include an imbedded judgment – to use the resource above example, when one says “We don’t have the resources we need” there’s a pretty strong implication that somebody is to blame for setting unrealistic expectations or refusing legitimate staffing requests. Implicitly or explicitly, that lets the group off the hook and excludes whoever is (or may feel they are seen as) the source of the problem from being part of the solution. TENSIONS, in contrast, draw people in by acknowledge the legitimate forces stretching the group and by avoiding simplistic STORIES that lay blame, rather than getting to the heart of why things are the way they are.

Three preliminary questions help teams frame the TENSION for a creative CONVERSATION:

- The human center of the TENSION: For whom does this matter?
- Situational background: What background is required to understand the situation?
- Constraints: What assumptions, boundaries, deadlines, and decisions exist?

As you work through these questions, it’s important to pay attention to a few things.

One, what do you know vs. what do you believe? The STORIES we tell ourselves are powerful. Often, they’re also wrong. The more you can challenge yourself to distinguish actual facts from your beliefs (about why somebody did something, what matters to them, what they are/aren’t open to, etc.), the more you can approach what you don’t know with curiosity and the more possibilities you will create.

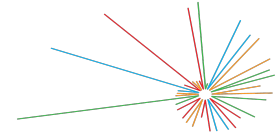
Two, think expansively. Teams can limit possibilities by framing TENSIONS narrowly. For example, if I’m 45 minutes late for a work dinner because of something that happened with a colleague, there’s not much I can do – the interaction with the colleague is over, and I can’t change the fact that I’m 45 minutes late for the dinner. But as I consider next steps, I can think expansively. What happened with my colleague? What my desired future state for those interactions? What are the consequences of being so late for dinner? What might I do to restore trust/repair damage with the people I kept waiting?

Three, be clear about your desired future state. Your aspirations can be big, but try to avoid empty aspirational visions that lack any meat. In addition, make sure your desired future state is a positive statement (what you want to achieve), not a negative one (what you want to avoid), and a “what” (where you want to get to), not a “how” (a means or expected path to an end, rather than an actual end).

Four, own your stuff. TENSIONS often arise because of different beliefs or assumptions. For example, using the staffing example above, if the reason the team feels it has inadequate resources is that whoever controls the resources believes the team spends too much energy making things perfect when “good enough” would be fine, the issue isn’t really resources – it’s a lack of alignment on the team’s tolerance for risk or imperfection. If that’s what’s happening, then the way to resolve the TENSION isn’t for the person who controls the resources to be more generous – it’s for the group to have a meaningful discussion of what risks are acceptable and, quite possibly, for the person naming the TENSION to confront their discomfort with taking risk.

Five, avoid the easy out. TENSIONS are like rubber bands – they pull you in two directions. That can be uncomfortable. The easiest way to remove the strain is to let go, allowing the rubber band to snap back. Just like when you exercise, however, growth only comes when you hold onto and work with the discomfort the TENSION creates.

Finally, imagine a future state that brings out the best in others and try to frame TENSIONS in a way that’s inclusive – of others’ aspirations, their views of the current reality, and their views of the constraints.



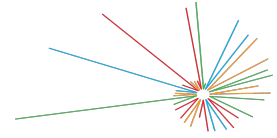
Session 2: Session Prep

Before every session, each participant should read the background materials for the session and think: about the last session, about what’s happening and what it means to them, and about the session to come.

The following chart will help you prepare. You can use this written form if it’s helpful.

If you like, your group can collect submissions in advance and share them. Doing so can help make **STORIES** more visible and streamline the identification of **TENSIONS**.

<p>PRESENCE: What are your current practices and how do you feel you’re doing with them?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">SKIP FOR SESSION 2</p>	<p>The goal of this pre-work is to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Think about PRESENCE, ACTION, STORIES and TENSIONS before the session. ➤ Collect TENSIONS in advance in order to make the session as efficient as possible. ➤ Make the STORIES, TENSIONS and ACTIONS public and a normal part of work. <p>Even though you won’t have time to address all TENSIONS during the session, it’s still valuable to spend some time naming them.</p> <p>At a minimum, it helps the group see things more clearly.</p> <p>Sometimes, simply naming TENSIONS is enough to make slight shifts to the system over time.</p> <p>If you want, you can agree to get together to talk about them in another setting.</p>
<p>ACTION: What actions did you agreed to at your last session? What progress have you made?</p>	
<p>STORY: Jot down a positive culture story – a real, recent example of something that you believe demonstrates the best of your culture in action.</p>	
<p>TENSION(S): What TENSION(s) do you want to FOCUS on/raise with the group? Remember to phrase them as questions: “How might I/we?”</p>	



Session 2: Additional Resources

For more on TENSIONS, check out the Additional Resources page on the Culture in Action website.