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Surface the tension

To make great choices, we must find the courage to identify and surface the most pressing tensions that need attention.

Tension is the fundamental experience of opposition. When we experience tension, it fosters anxiety. The unanswered questions that arise as we face different options create the feeling of being uncomfortable and stuck at the same time. We often sense tensions early on but refuse to face them due to the sheer discomfort of it. We keep them at bay.

Yet tensions also hold potential for transformation, the opportunity to energise and catapult us forward if we approach them creatively. Great leaders know this and are good at sensing tensions and identifying which ones to deal with before they get out of hand. The first step is to invite them in rather than push them away. Actively look for them, invite others to share them and have courageous conversations that surface them and explore them with curiosity.

An effective way of surfacing tension is to invite diversity of thought into our conversations. If your leadership team is not diverse, you can make a conscious effort to be in conversation with people who are different from you and can challenge your perspective.

The second step is to find comfort in discomfort, so we can stay in the tension long enough to explore it before we act. It can be a paradoxical feeling of feeling uncomfortable with the uncertainty of where the tension will take us while feeling invigorated by the opportunity for new

insights. To manage the discomfort, it can be effective to take deliberate breaks from the tension where we do something that fills us with positive emotions and refuels our energy.

By having the courage to sense and name tensions, you inspire others to do the same.

Questions for reflection

- What conversation would we least like to have right now?
That is the conversation we should be having.
- What hunches do we have about emerging tensions, and who would be able to confirm or dismiss them?
Find those people and test your hunches.
- When have we last had a conversation with someone considered a minority or on the fringes of the organisation?
Emerging tensions often live at the edges of the organisation, and listening to people who represent something other than the norm can be an effective way of picking up on them.
- What is the story behind the words?
In your touchpoints with people, pay attention to what is not being said, what is not being done and what is being communicated nonverbally through energy and body language – this provides important clues about current tensions.

Get on the balcony

To make great choices, create the balcony moments that add perspective and help you see the problem with clarity.

Leaders tend to be on the dance floor – in the action – tackling ever emerging tensions while trying to keep up with the beat of the organisation. A fast beat can make most of us feel compelled to make fast decisions. In that mode, we often get into a fixer mindset – and for every quick fix we make, we get a shot of dopamine that makes us feel great. It is that lovely sense of doing. Getting that tick mark. Feeling that sense of progress. The challenge is that with paradoxical tensions, there are no simple quick fixes. As American writer H.L. Mencken famously said: “For every complex problem we experience, we can identify an answer that is both clear, simple – and wrong”.

To counteract this urge towards quick-fix responses, we need to spend time diagnosing what is really going on.

This is particularly important when we need to frame what problem to solve. To understand a problem requires the ability to create some distance. It requires balcony moments where we take a step back and look at the problem from above. From that vantage point, we can see things from a different perspective, explore new angles and perhaps see patterns that were not evident to us before.

To get on the balcony, we have to be able to leave the dance floor every so often to

a 360-degree view of the tension and see what the real problem is. Even when the music keeps playing. As leaders, we have to shape the conversation that allows for a more refined understanding of the challenge and, in doing so, improves the odds of coming up with a great answer.

Questions for reflection

- Have we identified the most critical tension to deal with?
- Have we framed the tension as a “both/and” – demonstrating that we understand the underlying paradox?
- Have we looked at the tension from different angles to understand what the real underlying problem is?
- Could there be other interpretations of the tension than the one we have right now? What other interpretations could be as true or truer?

Be honest! Are our interpretations self-serving? Are we driven by our own biases? What is it that we might not see?

Reality test your own interpretations with those of others. Get a different, fresh perspective. Ask how they would think about this.

Explore the beauty of opposites



To make great choices, get a deep understanding of the opposing options for solving the problem.

The tension of a wicked problem is often a source of frustration. At the same time, each of the opposites always has some embedded beauty or a gift to offer. Something that works. An inner logic. A number of benefits that are not visible at first. Most often, we have a hard time seeing the gift of opposing views at the moment. We have our biased favourites, and we often fall in love with our own ideas far too fast. However, to fully open ourselves up to the possible paths for the tension, we should give ourselves permission to fall in love with and see the beauty in the opposing points of view.

Searching for that beauty is the beginning of a creative resolution where we can make the most of the tension we are faced with. We simply make better choices when we allow ourselves to imagine different ways of resolving the problem.

To explore the beauty of opposites, we first need to identify two opposing options for how to navigate the tension and then push those options to an extreme so that each represents a core idea.

Second, we look for what is similar and different about those options and articulate what we value most about them.

Third, looking at what they value most, we map what makes it hard to reconcile the ideas.

Fourth, we examine the underlying assumptions of each idea and challenge ourselves to see where those assumptions may not always be true.

Questions for reflection

- What are two distinct potential options for how to navigate this tension and solve the problem?
- What might be the beauty and gift of our least favourite option?
- What would it look like if we pushed each of these options to the extreme?
- What is similar and different about those options – and what do we value most about them?
- What underlying assumptions do the options make that may not always hold?
- If the assumptions are only part of the story, how might that change the way we think about the tension?
- What would stop us from using both options at the same time?
- How could we think of this differently in a way that would make the tension go away?

Reconnect to the shared dream

To make great choices, create a foundation of unity and connect to the shared dream behind the tension.

Have you ever made a long list of pros and cons when trying to choose between options? The list will likely help you gain a deeper understanding of each option but will hardly make it easier for you to see a way forward. The options we feel torn between often make us feel that way because each option truly has something valuable to offer.

When we have conflicting views on what is the right thing to do, we may even be unable to see any beauty in others' perspectives. At that point, it is helpful to reconnect to a shared overarching dream and the higher purpose of what we are trying to achieve.

Connecting to a shared dream energises us to progress, even in the face of difficulty, and provides a long-term focus that makes short-term decisions easier to deal with. It can motivate us to embrace tensions, unite opposite poles and give us a greater sense of meaning.

If we are unable to find a shared dream or higher purpose, that is the courageous conversation to start with.

Questions for reflection

- What is our shared dream?
- What do we stand for as an organisation? What higher purpose do we serve, and what are our values?
- How might that shared dream, that purpose and those values guide us in navigating this tension and making a great choice?

Search for the *and*

To make great choices, combine opposing options in creative ways that allow you to get the best of both.

Either/or choices are limited at best and detrimental at worst. They get us into vicious patterns where we polarise ourselves against others and get so stuck in our own perspective that we cannot move forward.

An integrative approach shifts our lens to a both/and perspective, asking “how might we get the best of both worlds?” It refuses to go down the path of either/or – A or B – in choice making; the price is simply too high. It insists that there is a creative way that is distinctly better than what either “A” or “B” can offer. It is not a bland compromise – it pushes beyond that.

An integrative approach challenges us to be hybrid thinkers capable of keeping several opposing options in mind at the same time and creatively exploring the silver linings that can lead us to one or more superior choice option(s).

Sometimes that choice will be in the form of creative integration where, instead of choosing between A or B, we find a C that integrates the most desirable aspects of A and B.

Other times, the choice will be to micro-shift between opposing alternatives in a

way that creates an ongoing balance. Like a tightrope walker finding their way forward on the tightrope by balancing from side to side without losing focus on the bigger goal in the distance.

To search for the and, we need to shift from an either/or to a both/and perspective and allow ourselves to imaginatively explore the avenues that open up.

Questions for reflection

- What options for integration emerge if I change the question from either/or to both/and? “How might we both [option A] and [option B]?”
- If we could only keep one thing from option A and one thing from option B, what would it be?
- Under what conditions could option A generate the benefits of option B – and vice versa?
- What might it look like if we tried to micro-shift between A and B, keeping our overall purpose in mind?

Evaluate possible solutions

To make great choices, create different possible solutions and evaluate each of them before determining how to move forward.

Once we have explored different pathways to unfold the potential the tension holds, we need to make a final choice. To do so, we first have to get ourselves into a resourceful position of having multiple possible solutions to evaluate and ensure that the possible solutions all hold an integrative both/and perspective.

We must then unfold the possible solutions and make the solutions more concrete, which will likely make the flaws and weaknesses of each more evident. An effective way to do this is by visualising or expressing the idea very concretely, telling the story about how that would play out if we went all in on that particular idea. What would great look like from that angle?

Once we have clarity about what each possible solution is, we can seek better understanding of which conditions each possible solution hinges on. What would have to be true for this idea to be great?

To understand those conditions, we need to bring the key stakeholders to mind – those who matter most to the solution, those who are most impacted by the tension and those who sit with important insights.

To evaluate possible solutions, we have to shed light on the unconscious assumptions we rely on to see if the solution we prefer truly is the best choice. All too often, we tend to get wrapped up in one solution, and we forget to question what assumptions it makes. But to make that final choice the best choice we can, we have to lay those assumptions bare to see.

Questions for reflection

- How might we line up not just one solution but multiple possible solutions to the tension we are dealing with?
- How might we ensure that those possible solutions all hold an integrative perspective – bringing together or balancing the best of the opposing poles of the tension we are dealing with?
- Under what conditions would this possible solution be a winning solution to deal with the tension for this key stakeholder?
- How do we leverage our insight in testing whether the most critical assumptions on which the choice or solution hinges are in place?

