



# Constructive tension

## Thought starters

### Worksheets:

#### Tension tour

10-15 min

Reflect on the root cause of moments of tension on the team.

#### Harness/defuse

15-20 min

Identify opportunities to benefit from and release tension on the team.

# What is constructive tension?

The productive force that results when teams harness their differences.

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**Constructive tension is about thinking differently, not differing opinions.**

Tension can be a productive way to push the team's thinking and expand points of view. The most effective teams know how to harness tension and turn it into a generative force.

## More like:

Respectfully disagreeing with your teammates on a topic because you have a different point of view.

## Less like:

Relentlessly pushing your own perspective forward without seeking to understand and consider other perspectives.

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**Constructive tension is about creating harmony, not disturbance.**

## More like:

Recognizing a moment of tension and using tools to harness or defuse it.

## Less like:

Reacting to a moment of tension with anger or aggression.



# Tension tour

Reflect on the root cause of moments  
of tension on the team.

Name a time when you experienced conflict within a team.  
Who was involved? What was the situation?

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What do you think made the moment so tense? There are  
multiple sources of tension—it can be because of a difference  
in opinion, an inflexible process, and beyond.

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## Worksheet

# Harness/ defuse

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Create rituals that help teams harness or defuse tension as it arises.

Consider two types of tension:

- **Destructive tension** —  
Example: Coworker makes accusatory remarks instead of asking questions to understand why a decision was made.
- **Constructive tension** —  
Example: Coworkers share differing points of view with evidence that supports their position. Then, they come to a different conclusion based on their merged perspectives.

There are also ways to deal with tension:

- Defuse destructive tension by acknowledging it.
- Harness constructive tension that results from differing perspectives, turning it into a generative force.

Take some time to identify tensions that you would like to harness or defuse.

## Tensions to harness:

## Example

Our weekly design critiques feel super successful and make our work better.

Tensions to defuse:

## Example

## Team stand-ups feel tense.



# Harness/ defuse

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Next, dig deeper into one of the moments of destructive tension you described. Start by naming the moment. Then, identify the conditions that surrounded that moment. Finally, imagine some strategies that might have helped defuse the tension.

Name the tension.

How do you spot it?

What does the tension feel like?

How do you know it's destructive?

What are some strategies or techniques that might help you defuse the tension?