



Constructive tension

Facilitator guide

Activities and worksheets:

Tension translator

45-60 min

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

Tension perspectives

45-60 min

Dissect a moment of tension from different viewpoints on the team.

What is constructive tension?

The productive force that results when teams harness their differences.

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 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.

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.

Constructive tension

Activity 1 of 2

Tension translator

Tension can be harnessed into a productive force with the right techniques in place. This activity will help the team create a common language to harness tension into a productive force.



Facilitator instructions

The tension translator activity has four steps:

- 01 — Set the stage
- 02 — Guide a discussion
- 03 — Initiate a brainstorm
- 04 — Keep it going

Context

When the team needs help getting through a difficult moment or set of experiences.

Goal

Develop rituals and a shared language to defuse tension into a productive force.

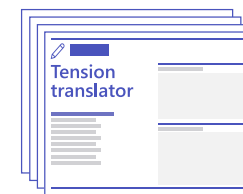
Time

45-60 minutes



Worksheet

Tension translator — pg. 8-11



Materials needed

Markers
Sticky notes



01

Set the stage

Activate

When harnessed effectively, tension can unlock diverse opinions and lead to outstanding work.

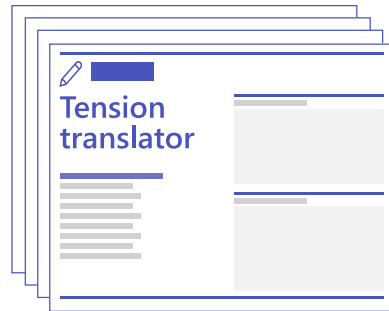
To get the team thinking, try these talking points:

- We're going to discuss the different types of tension and how we can harness it productively.
- Tension is similar to stress and can be productive or unproductive depending on the context.
- The conversation will help us align on a shared definition of tension and identify tactics we can all take to resolve it.

Print worksheet

Print out the worksheet for each of your team members for this activity:

Tension translator worksheet —
pg. 8-11



Prepare

Get ready to facilitate the tension translator activity with your team.

Take these steps to get ready:

- ☐ Review the tension translator worksheet and print enough for your team.
- ☐ Invite the team to complete the first three pages of the tension translator worksheet. You can assign it as prework or have the team spend the first 10 to 15 minutes completing it.
- ☐ You might consider asking the team to share responses with you in advance, so you can understand the kinds of tension that may be shared with the group.
- ☐ Set up a 45- to 60-minute meeting and invite the team.
- ☐ If you have a remote team member, help them feel included by starting a Microsoft Teams meeting and sharing your Whiteboard or camera.



02

Guide a discussion

Reflect

If the team completed the first three pages of the translator as prework, invite them to share their list of tensions they identified. If not, set aside the first 15 minutes for everyone to silently reflect. Then, invite the team to share their responses.

As they share, capture the different types of tension on sticky notes for the group to see and refer back to. You'll revisit these throughout the activity.

To get the team thinking, start with a few open-ended questions:

- What was the context?
- What did it feel like?
- What were the signals?
- What contributed to the tension—either in positive ways or in ways that made the event more challenging?

Synthesize

Now it's time to pause and invite the team to notice trends on the different types of tensions.

Ask the team to identify common patterns of productive tension examples.

Then ask the team to identify other tensions. For example, maybe there is always a tension related to deadlines or communication. Ask the team to add to the list, if necessary.

Finally, begin grouping the tensions into similar themes. For example, if three people identified "project planning," "communicating timelines," and "acknowledging urgency," you know that all three of those responses relate to the same tension.

Draft

Once the team has refined the list of tensions to address, capture the team's responses in the first column of the fourth page of the the tension translator worksheet. This will help introduce the next part of the activity.



03

Initiate a brainstorm

Tee up

Now that you've had a chance to reflect on the different types of tension, it's time to brainstorm ways of harnessing and defusing these tensions.

Take the list of tensions you've captured in the first column on page four of the tension translator worksheet.

Read them again to the team so that everyone can take notes on what you're discussing.

Generate ideas

Next, invite the team to brainstorm ways to transform each tension into a productive force.

These can be playful defusion tactics or ways of managing different points of view.

Here are some thought starters:

- Are there "safe words" to create for a tension that needs to be defused? For example, saying "banana" if you need space by yourself and don't want to talk to anyone.
- How might we identify and acknowledge productive tension in the moment? What might be signals of productive tension?
- How might you invite engagement with productive tension?

Capture

Capture ideas the group has identified in the second column of the tension translator worksheet.



04

Keep it going

Revisit

By the end of this activity, you will have a list of ways to defuse tension. These tactics must be accepted and agreed upon by the team to be successful.

Revisit the techniques at the next group meeting. Do they still sound like tactics the team can remember?

As moments of tension arise, call those moments out explicitly and suggest the team use one of the agreed-upon tactics.

Repeat

Tension can be difficult to discuss. Your team may need to address the tensions and brainstorm strategies more than once. The more the team addresses tension, the easier and more natural it will become. Are there any new ideas? Ways of defusing destructive tension?

Revise

As the team makes use of these strategies, invite team members to reconsider them. Are they working? Do they need revision?

Teams are dynamic and always changing, so these strategies should evolve too.



Tension translator

Page 1 of 4

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

Consider two types of tension:

- **Destructive tension** —
Example: A coworker makes accusatory remarks instead of asking questions to understand why a decision was made.
- **Constructive tension** —
Example: A coworker shares 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:

Tensions to defuse:



Tension translator

Page 2 of 4

Now, pick one of the **destructive tensions** you listed and define it with more detail.

Name the tension.

What are the signs of this tension?

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?



Tension translator

Page 3 of 4

Next, pick one of the [constructive tensions](#) you listed to define it in more detail.

Name the tension.

How do you spot it?

What does the tension feel like?

How do you know it's constructive?

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



Tension translator

Page 4 of 4

With your team, list common types of tensions in the left-hand column. Then, move to brainstorming ways to diffuse or harness this tension.

Type of tension		Tactic
	→	
	→	
	→	

Examples

I'm often interrupted by coworkers when I need heads-down time in an office space.	→	I set the norm that when I am wearing headphones, I'm signaling that I need heads-down time. I ask the team to reach out to me later if possible.
Our team doesn't have clarity on deadlines, and it often feels like a blame game when reporting progress.	→	We have a team agreement that we will not end a stand-up unless all deadlines have been defined.

Constructive tension

Activity 2 of 2

Tension perspectives

Differing viewpoints on the team can be productive if you know how to harness them. This activity allows the team to consider differing points of view as a form of constructive tension.



Facilitator instructions

The tension perspectives activity has three steps:

01 — Set the stage

02 — Guide a discussion

03 — Keep it going

Context

When different points of view create gridlock to the team's progress.

Goal

Explore new perspectives to better understand why tension occurs and how to address it.

Time

45-60 minutes



Worksheet

Tension perspectives — pg. 16-17



Materials needed

Markers

Sticky notes



01

Set the stage

Activate

Set a productive tone for this activity. Let the team know that by addressing moments of tension, the team can continuously improve and harness them to create better outcomes.

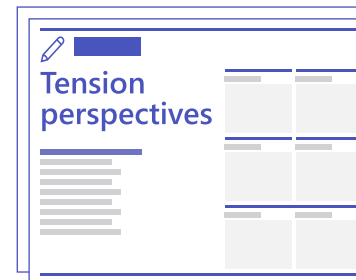
To get the team thinking, try these talking points:

- During this activity, we will address both constructive and destructive tension. We will share stories today that will uncover differing perspectives and motivations.
- Tension exists in all teams.
- While tension may feel negative, it can be transformed into a productive force to make the team more successful.
- At the end of this activity, we will all be able to identify different moments of tension and know how to deal with them effectively.

Print worksheet

Print out the worksheet for each of your team members for this activity:

[Tension perspectives — pg. 16-17](#)



Prepare

Get ready to facilitate the tension perspectives activity with your team.

Take these steps to get ready:

- ☐ Review the tension perspectives worksheet and print enough for the team.
- ☐ You might consider asking the team to complete the worksheet as prework. You can also choose to set aside the first 15 to 20 minutes of the meeting for the team to complete.
- ☐ Invite the team to a 45- to 60-minute meeting to dig deep into moments of tension and listen to each other's perspective.
- ☐ If you have a remote team member, help them feel included by starting a Microsoft Teams meeting and sharing your Whiteboard or camera.



02

Guide a discussion

Reflect

Once the team has completed the tension perspectives worksheet (either as prework or at the start of the activity), invite the team to share their answers.

After a few people have shared their responses, ask the team to pick one moment to explore deeper and brainstorm solutions.

Dig deep

With one tense moment identified, ask the team to take on differing perspectives of people who experienced this moment of tension.

For example, if there was a tense meeting surrounding a looming deadline, invite team members to take on the perspective of the team lead, a contributing team member, and someone else in the room, to dissect what everyone might have been feeling.

Perspective-taking enables us to open up and empathize with others to consider the tension from multiple angles.

Synthesize

After exploring that tension from multiple angles, invite new voices to the discussion.

Reflect with these questions:

- What did each person learn through this reflection?
- Is there a perspective that was missing?
- How might the different lenses we have as contributing team members help or exacerbate tense moments?
- How can we be better at taking on multiple perspectives in the future?



03

Keep it going

Revisit

Think about perspective-taking as a practice that can continue to be cultivated. Find new opportunities for the team to take on differing perspectives and see tension from multiple angles.

Remember that you can revisit the tension in any moment, big or small—from daily stand-ups to quarterly presentations to final deadlines.

If managers see a tension, they can share them in one-on-ones and work with the team members to identify solutions.

Repeat

As the team changes, these practices must be revisited. Consider finding recurring moments to repeat this activity so that the practice of perspective-taking feels like a natural rhythm for the team.

There may be moments when tension goes beyond your immediate team but affects other teams as well. When it makes sense, share this exercise with other teams you work with cross-functionally.



Tension perspectives

Page 1 of 2

Dissect a moment of tension from different viewpoints on the team.

Pick a time when you had a healthy debate on the team. This is when two different perspectives created a new understanding.

Summarize the context.

What happened?

What did the tension feel like?

What was a breakthrough moment?

Choose two perspectives from people involved.
What enabled them to be open and considerate?

Perspective one: _____

Perspective two: _____



Tension perspectives

Page 2 of 2

Pick a time when you experienced an unhealthy debate on the team. This is when differing perspectives could not be reconciled and stressful friction occurred.

Summarize the context.

What happened?

What did the tension feel like?

What was a breakthrough moment?

Choose two perspectives from people involved.
What might they have been challenged by or fearful of?

Perspective one: _____

Perspective two: _____