

Application Guide

MANAGING ORGANIZATIONAL TENSION



BOTTOM LINE:

Tension is a natural and necessary part of successful organizations. Leaders must learn to recognize the difference between “problems that need to be solved” versus “tensions that need to be managed.”

KEY TAKEAWAYS

I. Organizational tension is natural and necessary.

- A. Tension: The act of stretching or straining; the state of being stretched or strained; mental or emotional strain
 - 1. Goal setting and risk-taking involve stretching and straining.
 - 2. Chasing new opportunities or responding to new economic realities creates a state of being stretched or strained.
 - 3. Tension can be positive—trying to get something done, or negative—trying to keep something from happening.
- B. The only way an organization can get rid of tension is to no longer exist, so leaders must deal with the fact that tension never goes away.
- C. Every thriving organization knows how to **manage** tension, which involves **monitoring** the present tensions.

II. There is a difference between problems that need to be solved and tensions that need to be managed. If you confuse the two you confuse the organization.

- A. Tension to manage: Something that won't go away like your work-life, home-life balance.
- B. Recognizing the difference is important because if you solve a healthy tension, you will often create an unsolvable problem.
 - 1. Example: If you try to solve the tension between income and expenses, you either spend your way out of business or you conserve your way out of business. Companies must spend their ways to success but with financial constraints.
 - 2. Example: Trying to solve the tension between funding for marketing or product development; there is never enough money for both to get what they want. Organizations need good products in order to market, but they also need to be marketed well to be successful.
- C. When people understand the difference between tensions to manage and problems to solve, they are better equipped to have healthy conversations that lead to sustained progress.

III. **Three ways leaders can determine whether a situation is a tension to manage rather than something that requires solving.**

- *Once a problem is solved, it should stay solved.* When something keeps recurring, it is generally an indicator it's a tension to manage, not a problem to solve.
- *Consider the advocates on both sides of an issue.* Are they competent individuals who have valid points? Then it is likely a tension to manage because if one side loses the argument, the organization will lose something.
- *Are the two sides of a conversation interdependent?* In most cases, if two sides are interdependent and can't exist without the other, it cannot be resolved and will require ongoing management.

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IV. The role leaders have in managing organizational tensions:

- A. Leaders should weigh in and give people helpful language around the issue in order to keep the tension in a healthy place.
- B. Leaders must pay attention to the words they use around an issue because their words weigh more than others and have the ability to tip the scale in an unhelpful direction.
- C. Leaders should pay attention and call off the person who has the stronger personality. People with strong personalities like to win, but as the leader you must move away from a win/lose mindset and get the organization to the healthiest place.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR TEAM DISCUSSION

- 1. What issues keep coming up in your leadership meetings no matter what you do to attempt to solve them? How can you try to manage them instead?
- 2. List the positive tensions you have within your organization. How can that encourage you to keep moving forward when negative tensions arise?
- 3. Describe a time when your words positively influenced those around you? When they negatively influenced those around you?
- 4. How can you actively remind yourself of the weight your words carry?
- 5. Who on your team has a strong personality? How can you monitor the team so that this individual doesn't accidentally solve a tension that should be managed?

NEXT EPISODE

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