

from the desk of

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Tension

By Matt Rawlins ©

Simon walked into the meeting and sat down. He looked around the room at the others seated there and could feel the tension in the air.

If this were you, is your first response to think that something is wrong?

It is interesting to note that there is no positive word in the English language for conflict or tension. Some of the other words you can find in a dictionary are stress, hassle, anxiety, problem or apprehension. If any of these words were used in a sentence like, "There is 'tension' in my relationship.' The overwhelming response from people would be to think that something is wrong.

If you have a mindset that views any tension as a sign that something is wrong, you will struggle with asking questions. For asking questions can produce tension. The reverse of this would also be true, if there is tension, it would be a good time to ask questions. If a person is going to learn to be a good communicator, they must also rethink the purpose of tension and not assume that it means that something is automatically wrong.

In order to develop the Art of Inquiry, we must look at the healthy and important part tension plays in relationships. Without managed tension there would be little movement, growth or life in any of our relationships, teams or organizations. Tension is merely the signal that there is difference or uniqueness in people and that in itself is a vital part of a relationship.

Some key points to tension include:

1) Managing tension is the life of any relationship. Too little tension and there is apathy. Too much tension and there is stress. The key is learning how to manage tension to keep the relationship alive. Each person will have the capacity for varying amounts of tension in different situations.

Communication is necessary to handle this tension on a hourly, daily or monthly basis. Tension is an important mechanism that tells us it is time to communicate.

2) The main purpose of tension is to tell you and others working with you, where you are. It is a reality check and keeps you grounded in what is going on. The more clearly you know where you are, the easier it is to know how to get to where you want to go.

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3) Tension reveals the mindset of a person as to how they will deal with the world around them. One mindset that most of us have grown up with is that all of life is a problem to be solved and tension is the signal that something is wrong. This may be true of the mechanical world, but it is not always the case of the world of human relations.

The world of human relationships is not a problem to be solved but healthy values that are in tension with each other. These values are to be explored, understood and then ordered through communication towards common goals. The tension that is there is the result of dilemmas at work. Some common dilemmas in any team or organization are relationship focus versus task, individual focus versus group, future focus versus present or internal focus versus external.

Let's look at the dilemmas between the group and an individual. Let us use the illustration of a man on a tightrope. You have two platforms set up with a thick rope between them. On one platform is the value of the individual. On the other platform is the value of the group. These two platforms are connected to each other and there is a clear and healthy tension between them.

With this illustration in mind, without allowing some individuality for each person the group becomes stagnant and conformity is the rule. Without the group, the individual becomes lost and you end up with anarchy. The life is out on the rope where the tension is. That is the hardest part for us to understand. The platform may be safe but there is little action, growth or even movement without accepting the risk and importance of tension. There are times you need to allow individuality and other times to focus on the group.

There are two typical ways of dealing with tension. The first is to see tension as wrong and to try to take control, to make rules and try and get the action 'right'. The other way is through dialogue or communication. Tension is the signal that there is a difference in the way something is being viewed and can be a great opportunity to clarify, grow and learn new things.

If you take the first route you may think questions are a form of challenge or even rebellion and make rules to remove the questions. In the second way you see that tension is healthy and a signal that communication is needed and welcome questions to give a greater understanding of the situation you are in.

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CARL SAGAN

It is the tension between creativity and skepticism that has produced the stunning and unexpected findings of science.

VICTOR FRANKL:

What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him.

Matt Rawlins "Tension", The Straits Times, Singapore, 23 March 2008, Recruit section.