



# Tension Mapping

*Slowing Down Long Enough to Understand What Leadership Is Trying to Show Us*

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

**Avoiding tension leads to dysfunction. Mapping it creates insight – helping leaders surface competing priorities and move forward with intention.**

Tension Mapping: Slowing Down Long Enough to Understand What Leadership Is Trying to Show Us

*“Seek first to understand, then to be understood.”*  
– Stephen Covey

## Introduction

Leadership rarely slows down.

Meetings move quickly, decisions need to be made, and the pressure to maintain momentum is constant. Leaders quickly learn that much of their role involves moving situations forward—assessing information, making judgment calls, and helping the organization keep pace with what’s ahead.

Over time, most leaders become very good at operating this way. They learn to process information quickly, weigh competing priorities, and make decisions with incomplete information. Forward motion becomes second nature.

But every so often, something interrupts that pace.

A moment of tension.

It might appear as a reaction rising in a conversation, a subtle uneasiness about a decision that’s unfolding, or a challenge that triggers something unexpected inside you.

Most leaders move past these moments without stopping. The conversation continues, the meeting moves forward, and the decision progresses.

But those moments often hold some of the most important insights leadership has to offer.

## The Pace Leaders Learn to Keep

Leadership rewards forward motion. Organizations depend on it, teams rely on it, and the environment around us often demands it.

The expectation—spoken or not—is that leaders keep things moving. Assess the situation. Make the decision. Address the problem. Move to the next issue.

Over time, leaders become highly skilled at doing exactly that. They learn to act with speed and confidence, often under pressure. In many cases, this ability is what allows organizations to operate effectively in complex environments.

But the speed that makes leadership effective can also create a blind spot.

When leaders move quickly through moments of tension, they often move past signals that deserve closer attention. Not every important leadership moment announces itself clearly. Sometimes it appears quietly—through a reaction, a hesitation, or a feeling that something in the moment deserves a second look.

A flash of irritation when someone challenges your thinking. A tightening in a conversation when disagreement surfaces. A subtle sense that something about the decision in front of you doesn't quite sit right.

These moments pass quickly.

But they are rarely meaningless.

### What Leadership Tension Actually Looks Like

When people hear the word tension, they often imagine conflict—raised voices, strong disagreement, or visible friction between people.

But most leadership tension doesn't look like that.

More often, it shows up subtly. A leader may feel themselves becoming defensive during a conversation, or notice a sudden urge to assert authority when their thinking is questioned. Sometimes tension appears in the opposite direction: a leader withdrawing from a discussion instead of leaning into it.

Other times, it manifests as something harder to describe.

A vague sense of uneasiness about a direction the team is taking. A feeling that a decision being made doesn't fully align with something important, even if the reasoning appears sound on the surface.

Most leaders have been conditioned to move through these moments quickly.

Push past the discomfort. Stay focused on the objective. Keep the meeting moving.

But tension rarely appears without reason.

More often, it's pointing toward something beneath the surface—an assumption being challenged, a perspective that hasn't been fully explored, or a value that deserves closer attention.

Tension isn't always a problem to solve.

Often, it's information to notice.

### When Tension Goes Unnoticed

When tension passes without reflection, it rarely disappears.

Instead, it tends to show up later as a reaction.

A leader may become defensive when their thinking is challenged. They may assert authority more strongly than the moment requires. They may dismiss a perspective too quickly or withdraw from a difficult conversation entirely.

These reactions are rarely intentional. In fact, many leaders only recognize them later, when they reflect on the interaction and realize their response didn't quite match the situation.

But by that point, the moment has already shaped the conversation.

Over time, these small reactions begin to influence how others experience the leader. They affect how open people feel to challenge ideas or raise concerns. They shape the level of trust within leadership teams and influence the quality of dialogue that surrounds important decisions.

None of this happens dramatically.

It happens quietly, in small moments that pass too quickly to notice—unless a leader

learns to slow down long enough to recognize them.

***“Awareness comes before change.”***  
– James Clear

## The Practice of Tension Mapping

One of the most valuable habits a leader can develop is simply noticing tension when it appears.

Not reacting to it immediately. Not suppressing it. Just noticing it.

Tension mapping is the practice of recognizing these moments and becoming curious about them. When a leader feels tension rising in a conversation, they pause—sometimes only internally—and ask themselves a simple question:

What is happening for me right now?

Sometimes the answer is clear. Perhaps the leader feels challenged and wants to defend their position. Maybe a comment from a colleague triggered frustration or impatience.

Other times, the tension points to something deeper. The leader may feel pressure to appear certain in front of their team, or the conversation may be touching on a decision that doesn't fully align with their instincts.

These brief moments of awareness don't interrupt leadership.

They deepen it.

Because when leaders become aware of their own reactions, they gain the ability to choose how they respond rather than simply reacting in the moment.

## A Moment Many Leaders Recognize

Imagine a leadership meeting where a strategic direction is being discussed.

You present a proposal that feels logical and well considered. A colleague raises a challenge.

Almost immediately, you feel a reaction rising—perhaps irritation, perhaps the urge to explain your reasoning more forcefully.

Without awareness, that reaction might quickly turn into defensiveness. You clarify your position, reinforce the logic behind the proposal, and move the conversation forward. The discussion continues, but something subtle has shifted.

The room grows quieter. The willingness to challenge ideas decreases.

The moment passes, but the quality of the dialogue has narrowed.

Now imagine the same situation with a small shift in awareness.

Instead of reacting immediately, you notice the tension. You pause—perhaps only for a moment—and recognize the reaction rising inside you.

You realize the tension may not be about the comment itself. It may be connected to the pressure you feel to appear certain, or the weight of responsibility sitting behind the decision.

That moment of awareness creates space.

Instead of defending the proposal, you lean into curiosity.

“Say more about that concern.”

The conversation opens again. And what began as tension becomes insight.

Insight creates clarity about what the

moment is asking from you as a leader. Clarity about what's not obvious. Inviting collaboration and refining an even more effective path forward.

This often results in stronger alignment between what you feel and how you lead. Between what others experience and what you intend.

And in that alignment, tension stops being something to avoid.

It becomes something to learn from.

### The Leadership Advantage of Awareness

Leaders who learn to recognize tension often experience a subtle but powerful shift in how they lead.

They become less reactive in difficult conversations. They grow more comfortable with disagreement and more curious when perspectives differ from their own.

Over time, the people around them begin to notice the difference.

Meetings feel more open. Dialogue becomes richer. Perspectives that might have remained unspoken begin to surface.

The leader's presence becomes steadier—not because tension disappears, but because the leader has learned how to work with it rather than pushing past it.

***"Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response."***  
– Viktor Frankl

### A Final Reflection

Tension is not a leadership failure.

It is a signal.

It often appears in moments where something important is happening beneath the surface—an assumption being challenged, a perspective asking to be heard, or a value that deserves attention.

The question is not whether tension will appear in leadership.

It will.

The real question is whether we move past those moments or pause long enough to understand what they might be trying to show us.

Because sometimes the most important leadership insight appears in the smallest moment—just before reaction takes over.

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