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Creative Tension – The Essential Ingredient for Generating

Author Sarah Cornally

I want to introduce you to a concept called 'Creative Tension'. Whenever we work towards a significant achievement, we are using creative tension. Creative tension is required for learning to walk, learning to swim, completing an education, raising a child or building a business. Whenever we see high levels of performance and achievement, creative tension will be in action. Many of us use creative tension unconsciously but, if we develop a conscious awareness of it, we can create what truly matters to us more consistently.



Creative tension is, in essence, a principle of physics. It is the generation of energy between two points that are polarised; due to the relationship between them they want to resolve towards each other. In business, we can relate this to a current situation and a desired situation, with the creative tension being the potential energy moving us from one state to the other.

In business this is commonly called 'The Gap Analysis'. The desired state is identified and compared with the current state. Action steps are then created to move from one state to the other. However this is an oversimplification of creative tension and how it works. It fails to highlight the importance of the gap and how to work with it.

Creative tension is initiated when we identify something we want to bring into being that currently doesn't exist. It is essential to have a deep sense of care and commitment towards our goal to sustain the energy required. The desired state must capture our imagination and have deep meaning for us. It must feel significant and be something we want to invest in. To make it realistic, we need to create a vision of a specific and tangible end result.

The potential energy is created when we juxtapose our desired result with an accurate and realistic assessment of our current reality. If the gap between the two states is big enough, it creates a sense of real challenge that generates energy towards change.

We can ask:

- What do we know and what don't we know?
- What resources do we have or not have?
- What barriers need to be overcome? How challenging are they?
- How do we move from this current reality to the end result?
- How will we sustain ourselves during the process?

The gap is the source of creative energy. It essentially creates the desire to move towards one pole or the other. The generative force arises from both poles simultaneously being in clear view and seen accurately. The art form is to recognise this force as creative tension – not to experience it as stress, anxiety, fear or doubt (because then we might attempt to solve the negative emotion by removing the cause of discomfort and effectively maintaining the status quo). If we can recognise creative tension, we have the opportunity to bring something new into being.

The archer, pictured, is a visual reference for creative tension. You can imagine all the resources that this archer needs to be able to hit the core of the target – her focus, her fitness, her skills and technique, her tools, her beliefs and attitudes and her state of being. Her current reality is the state of all these resources, her vision is hitting the centre of the target and the creative tension is how well she can organise these resources so that the arrow will reach its target.



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The tension is generative if it succeeds in bringing the desired outcome into being. Typically, this is not a straightforward process, but if the goal is important enough, the motivation will be there to pursue it.

On the other hand, it might be non-productive tension. The archer might fail to organise her resources in some way and miss the target or the arrow might fall short of it, consuming resources but not achieving the desired result. This sets up another creative tension. Will she learn from her experience or not? Will she hold to her vision or give up?

If the pursuit of creating overwhelms you, you may be either unable or unwilling to do what it takes to achieve. This will inhibit the creative tension, as the energy will flow back to the current reality instead of forward. This is often rationalised so we don't have to face the truth of our failure to create what really matters.

If we remain engaged by creative tension and work with it, any setbacks become opportunities to learn as we improve our awareness, insight and capability. As we hold our focus on resolving the desired outcome, we will achieve mastery of creative tension.

To learn more, set up a time to have a conversation with Sarah. To get in contact please email her EA, Leanne Imbro on ea@sarahcornally.com or call 02 9801 0659.

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