



Further Reading, Holding creative tension, 'The Fifth Discipline', Peter Senge (1990)

"The truly creative person knows that all creating is achieved through working constraints. Without constraints there is no creating."

– Robert Fritz

People often have great difficulty talking about their **visions**, even when the visions are clear. Why?

Because we are acutely aware of *the gaps* between our vision and reality.

"I'd like to start my own company," but "I don't have the capital." Or, "I would like to pursue the profession that I really love," but "I've got to make a living." These gaps can make a vision seem unrealistic or fanciful. They can **discourage** us and make us feel **hopeless**. But the gap between vision and current reality is also a **source of energy**. If there was no gap, there would be no need for any action to move towards the vision.

'Indeed, the gap is the source of creative energy. We call this gap creative tension.'

Imagine a rubber band, stretched between your vision and current reality. When stretched, the rubber band creates tension, representing the tension between vision and current reality. What does tension seek? Resolution or release. These are only two possible ways for the tension to resolve itself: pull reality towards the vision or pull vision toward reality. Which occurs will depend on whether we hold steady to the vision.

The principle of creative tension is the central principle of personal mastery, integrating all elements of the discipline. Yet, it is easily misunderstood. For example, the very term "tension" suggests anxiety or stress. But creative tension doesn't feel any particular way. It is the force that comes into play at the moment when we acknowledge a vision that is at odds with current reality.

Still, creative tension often leads to feelings or emotions associated with anxiety, such as sadness, discouragement, hopelessness, or worry. This happens so often that people easily confuse these emotions with creative tension. People come to think that the creative process is all about being in a state of anxiety. But it is important to realise that these "negative" emotions that may arise when there is creative tension are not creative tension itself. These emotions are what we call emotional tension.

If we fail to distinguish emotional tension from creative tension, we predispose ourselves to lowering our vision. If we feel deeply discouraged about a vision that's not happening, we may have a strong urge to lighten the load of that discouragement. There is one immediate

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remedy: lower the vision! (... “Oh, I didn't really care about being able to play in the recital. I'll have to make money as a music teacher in any case; I'll just concentrate there.”)

The dynamics of relieving emotional tension are insidious because they can operate unnoticed. Emotional tension can always be relieved by adjusting the one pole of the creative tension that is completely under our control at all times - the vision. The feelings that we dislike go away because the creative tension that was their source is reduced. Goals are now much closer to our current reality. Escaping emotional tension is easy - the only price we pay is abandoning what we truly want, our vision.

... When we hold a vision that differs from current reality, a gap exists (the creative tension) which can be resolved in two ways:

- taking action to bring reality into line with the vision – which takes time and involves frustration and emotional tension...
- or we can lower the vision to bring it into line with current reality.

We allow our goals to erode when we are unwilling to live with emotional tension. On the other hand, when we understand creative tension and allow it to operate by not lowering our vision, vision becomes an active force... to generate energy for change.

Failure is simply shortfall, evidence of the gap between vision and current reality. Failure is an opportunity for learning - about 1, inaccurate pictures of current reality, about 2, strategies that didn't work as expected, about 3, the clarity of the vision. Failures are not about our worthiness or powerlessness.

Mastery of creative tension brings out a capacity for perseverance and patience. We both fear and seek change. Or, as one seasoned organisation change consultant once put it, “people don't resist change. They resist being changed.”

Mastery of creative tension leads to a fundamental shift in our whole posture toward reality. Current reality becomes the ally not the enemy. An accurate, insightful view of current reality is as important as a clear vision. Unfortunately, most of us are in the habit of imposing biases on our perceptions of current reality. “It is more convenient to assume the reality is similar to our preconceived ideas than to freshly observe what we have before our eyes.” If the first choice in pursuing personal mastery is to be true to your own vision, the second fundamental choice is commitment to truth – (or what Jim Collins calls ‘The Brutal Facts’.)

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