

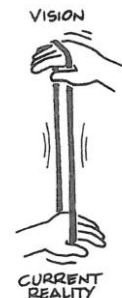
**Action Learning Diversity & Inclusion Exercises**  
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**(II) “Holding Creative Tension” (A Low Budget Action Learning Exercise)**

Purpose: To demonstrate the tension that exists between our current reality and our vision for the future.

Instructions:

1. Before you start your session (or during a break), place sufficient RUBBER BANDS at each table (or seating place) so each participant has ONE. I like to use # 33 size rubber bands: They are slightly thicker, but still very elastic. They may ask you what the rubber bands are for, and you can tell them “For an action learning exercise we’ll be conducting later... but they are NOT for shooting at one another ... or the facilitator!” (-:
2. Ask participants to slip the rubber band over the palm and 4 main fingers of one hand, with the hand resting palm down on the table (or in the air).
3. Slip the OTHER HAND under the rubber band, also facing palm down. i.e., Both hands should now be rubber banded together “pancake style” and resting vertically on top of one another on the table (or in the air).
4. Ask them to slowly RAISE their top hand slightly, so that a gap arises between their bottom and top hand. Demonstrate this yourself. Ask “WHAT DO YOU FEEL or NOTICE?” (Response: Tension in the rubber band). See diagram at right, from Peter Senge’s *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (NY: Doubleday, 1990), p. 151.
5. Tell them that the BOTTOM HAND represents their *current reality* with respect to where they are at on diversity and inclusion (or their leadership development etc.), and their TOP HAND represents their VISION FOR WHERE THEY WOULD LIKE TO BE (or goal for some future state) with respect to diversity & inclusion (D&I) efforts/progress.
6. Ask them to INCREASE the distance between their top and bottom hands slightly MORE (“Not too much or the rubber band will break, and although this is a low budget exercise, we may not have liability insurance coverage in case you get hurt by the rubber band!”) Demonstrate this with them.
7. Ask: “NOW what do you notice?” (Response: MORE tension on the rubber band.) WHAT IS THE POINT? Explain: “In other words: The greater the gap between where you are and where you would like to be, this represents the more tension you will naturally feel or experience. (You can physically bend/snap the rubber band with your top thumb



in this position so they can observe the tension and hear the twang.)

8. Tell them: “OK – You can now RELEASE the tension on the rubber band...” They will do so .... and then proceed IMMEDIATELY to step 9:
9. Quickly instruct them to “GO BACK 5 seconds, and place your hands in EXACTLY the same position they were in before I told you to ‘release the tension.’ Now, using your MUSCLE MEMORY, REPEAT – EXACTLY – what you did 10 seconds ago when I instructed you to release the tension, only THIS TIME *pay attention* and WATCH what your hands are doing ...” (Have them do so; You may keep your hands apart, showing the tension between the two while they do this.)
10. “WHICH HAND MOVED? For how many of you did your TOP HAND MOVE DOWN?” (Response will be 80-90% or more!). “Do you remember what your TOP HAND represented?” (Response: Our vision for the future/where we would like to be). “What did the BOTTOM HAND represent?” (Response: “Where we are NOW; i.e., our current reality.”) “SO ... most of you, nearly all of you, instinctively released the tension by defaulting to your current reality!”

Point out: “There WAS an alternative, of course. What COULD you have done?”  
Response: RAISE the bottom hand UP. (Demonstrate this or better yet, ask someone who DID do this to demonstrate the alternative BEFORE you reveal it to them!) and acknowledge: “But this requires MORE CONSCIOUS EFFORT, a more deliberate choice, more thought, more intention ... i.e., JUST LIKE IN REAL LIFE! ...”

11. WHICH BRINGS US TO THE OTHER MAIN POINT RAISED BY THIS EXERCISE:

“I did not move your hand. God did not move your hand. YOU MOVED YOUR HAND.” i.e., faced with tension between where we are and where we would like to be, we unconsciously LET GO OF WHAT WE WANT in favor of keeping what we have: It's EASIER to let go of our vision! This is largely “natural”, i.e., unconscious, automatic, and subtle. But with real consequences in real life. And we can MAKE A BETTER CHOICE!

NOTICE: In that moment, our attention has actually SHIFTED from what we want to create to the TENSION we feel ... and how to make the TENSION GO AWAY! In those moments, we are not addressing what we want to create, but focusing on the anxiety and tension we feel. And the easiest way to get rid of that tension is to – in essence - STOP CARING or stop trying. (As vividly captured in my research (2014) on how managers made such poor decisions on the NASA *Challenger* and *Columbia* Disasters!) We typically code any tension or anxiety we feel as NEGATIVE, but the tension is a palpable reminder that we actually CARE about something other than what we have NOW. We wouldn't be experiencing any tension if we just accepted that our current reality (where we are now, a.k.a. our BOTTOM HAND) is as good as it gets, and scaled back our vision (i.e., dropped out TOP HAND down to the same level).

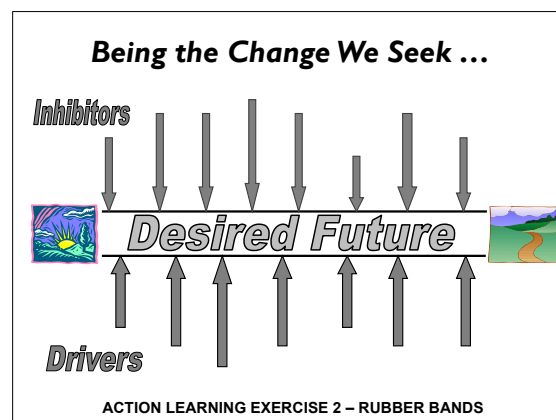
In short: The same tension that we experience as “anxiety that we want to get rid of”

CAN function as a source of CREATIVE TENSION that motivates us to MOVE FORWARD in the direction of what matters most to us and what we want to create ... together.

VARIATIONS: You can also do this exercise with (a) the palms facing one another, or (b) both hands face down in the same direction or (c) both hands in opposite orientations, bottom hand palm down/top hand, palm up (see diagram on right, from Peter Senge et al.'s *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (NY - Doubleday, 1994: p. 195) but the key is to stretch the rubber band VERTICALLY – i.e., up and down – as opposed to horizontally, i.e., left to right.



12. LINK this to the Powerpoint slide noting the DRIVING and RESTRAINING forces at work whenever we envision a desired future. See PPT slide rendition below.



At any given moment, there are – of course – many factors that can IMPEDE our progress towards our desired future (“Inhibitors” in the diagram above). And not all of them are external! Our own mental models and attitudes can hold us back. BUT AT THE SAME TIME, there ARE many factors present that can help us move TOWARDS our desired goal/future (“Drivers” in the diagram above), some EXTERNAL and some INTERNAL. (Note: We get at these internal factors when we address the “CONTINUE” frame of the STOP, START, CONTINUE Framework we typically close our workshops with.)

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#### References:

Maier, Mark. (2014). “The imperative for servant leadership: Reflections on the (enduring) dysfunctions of corporate masculinity.” Pp. 93-117 in R. Burke & D. Major, *Gender in organizations: Are men allies or adversaries to women’s career advancement?* Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.

Peter Senge. (1994). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New Ork: Doubleday.

Peter Senge, Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, Richard Ross & Bryan Smith. (1994). *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and tools for Building a Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday.