

# PROBLEM TO SOLVE OR TENSION TO MANAGE?

*A 10-question quiz to measure your leadership skills.*

***Great leaders don't just solve problems—they manage tensions.***

As a leader, you face hundreds of decisions every day, from quick email replies to high-stakes project choices. It's tempting to treat every challenge as a problem with a clear right or wrong answer.

But some challenges don't work that way. They're ongoing. Complex. They keep showing up again and again:

- *Should we give people freedom to work independently, or require closer collaboration?*
- *Should we be clear and candid in our communication, or diplomatic and tactful?*
- *Should we drive change and innovation, or protect stability and stick with what works?*

These aren't problems to solve—they're **tensions to manage**. And if you approach them with an "Either/Or" mindset, you'll end up stuck, divided, and further from the results you want.

The best leaders know the difference between a problem to solve and a tension to manage—and they leverage this skill to lead teams, drive change, and thrive in complexity.

***Do you?***

Take this 10-question quiz to find out!

# CAN YOU SPOT THE TENSION?

Read each of the 10 scenarios below and decide: is this a *problem to solve* or a *tension to manage*?

A scenario qualifies as a *Tension to Manage* if it meets **all three** of these criteria:

1. It's an **ongoing challenge**
2. There are **two valid points of view**, each with critical upsides
3. Focusing only on one side will **eventually backfire**

If the scenario doesn't meet all three, it's a *Problem to Solve*.

	SCENARIO	TENSION CRITERIA
1.	<p>A colleague insists: "Anyone who supports adopting AI across the company doesn't care about ethics or job security."</p> <p><b>Problem to Solve</b>      <b>Tension to Manage</b></p>	<p>Ongoing challenge</p> <p>Two valid points of view</p> <p>One-sided focus will backfire</p>
2.	<p>Your team is planning a client event and must choose between two catering companies. One costs \$15,000 and includes décor and service staff, while the other costs \$12,000 but requires your team to handle set-up and clean-up.</p> <p><b>Problem to Solve</b>      <b>Tension to Manage</b></p>	<p>Ongoing challenge</p> <p>Two valid points of view</p> <p>One-sided focus will backfire</p>
3.	<p>At his first team meeting, a new manager declares: "It's time to stop working independently and in silos. From now on, we're going to be fully integrated as one team."</p> <p><b>Problem to Solve</b>      <b>Tension to Manage</b></p>	<p>Ongoing challenge</p> <p>Two valid points of view</p> <p>One-sided focus will backfire</p>

	SCENARIO	TENSION CRITERIA
4.	<p>Your company is considering a merger with two competitors to form a larger organization. Leaders say it will reduce costs and increase efficiency, but employees fear it could weaken your vibrant culture.</p> <p><b><i>Problem to Solve</i></b>      <b><i>Tension to Manage</i></b></p>	<p>Ongoing challenge</p> <p>Two valid points of view</p> <p>One-sided focus will backfire</p>
5.	<p>An MBA professor tells his class: "Great leaders should always project confidence and never let them see you sweat."</p> <p><b><i>Problem to Solve</i></b>      <b><i>Tension to Manage</i></b></p>	<p>Ongoing challenge</p> <p>Two valid points of view</p> <p>One-sided focus will backfire</p>
6.	<p>The facilities team is deciding whether to retrofit the office with hybrid workspaces or keep the existing cubicles.</p> <p><b><i>Problem to Solve</i></b>      <b><i>Tension to Manage</i></b></p>	<p>Ongoing challenge</p> <p>Two valid points of view</p> <p>One-sided focus will backfire</p>
7.	<p>You've received complaints about a team member who's been late several times this past month. You also know they're going through a painful divorce. Should you enforce consequences or let it slide?</p> <p><b><i>Problem to Solve</i></b>      <b><i>Tension to Manage</i></b></p>	<p>Ongoing challenge</p> <p>Two valid points of view</p> <p>One-sided focus will backfire</p>
8.	<p>A factory manager must decide whether to continue using an old machine that no longer meets updated safety regulations.</p> <p><b><i>Problem to Solve</i></b>      <b><i>Tension to Manage</i></b></p>	<p>Ongoing challenge</p> <p>Two valid points of view</p> <p>One-sided focus will backfire</p>

	SCENARIO	TENSION CRITERIA
9.	<p>Your CEO kicks off her quarterly town hall by saying: “Our new company motto is CHANGE: out with the old, in with the new.”</p> <p><b><i>Problem to Solve</i></b>      <b><i>Tension to Manage</i></b></p>	<p>Ongoing challenge</p> <p>Two valid points of view</p> <p>One-sided focus will backfire</p>
10.	<p>Team members are divided about after-hours communication. Some value being responsive when urgent issues arise, even if it means sending a Slack message at 10 p.m. Others feel strongly that work should stay within office hours to protect personal time and wellbeing.</p> <p><b><i>Problem to Solve</i></b>      <b><i>Tension to Manage</i></b></p>	<p>Ongoing challenge</p> <p>Two valid points of view</p> <p>One-sided focus will backfire</p>

# ANSWERS

	PROBLEM TO SOLVE OR TENSION TO MANAGE?
1.	<p><i>A colleague insists: “Anyone who supports adopting AI across the company doesn’t care about ethics or job security.”</i></p> <p><b>Answer:</b></p> <p>This is a <b>Tension to Manage</b>. While your colleague frames AI as a simple problem with a right/wrong answer, the reality is more complex. Leaders today must continually value both <b>Efficiency AND Ethics</b>—leveraging AI to streamline work while ensuring it’s applied responsibly, transparently, and fairly. At the same time, they must embrace <b>High Tech AND High Touch</b>—harnessing the power of automation without losing the human judgment, creativity, and empathy that build trust and connection.</p>
2.	<p><i>Your team is planning a client event and must choose between two catering companies. One costs \$15,000 and includes décor and service staff; the other costs \$12,000 but requires your team to handle set-up and clean-up.</i></p> <p><b>Answer:</b></p> <p>This is a <b>Problem to Solve</b>. While both options have pros and cons, this decision doesn’t meet the criteria for a tension. It isn’t an ongoing challenge—it’s a one-time choice. Once the event is over, the issue goes away. And while there are trade-offs, it’s not critical to continually balance them over time, nor will choosing one option inevitably backfire. The smart move here is to gather the facts, weigh the costs against the effort required, make the decision, and move on.</p>
3.	<p><i>At his first team meeting, a new manager declares: “It’s time to stop working independently and in silos. From now on, we’re going to be fully integrated as one team.”</i></p> <p><b>Answer:</b></p> <p>This is a <b>Tension to Manage</b>. The manager is probably right to notice the need for more collaboration, but treating independent work as a problem to eliminate is a mistake. Strong teams require both <b>Collaboration AND Independence</b>. Working together fuels alignment, creativity, and shared purpose. At the same time, independence drives ownership, empowerment, and accountability. If this leader over-focuses on collaboration, the team will quickly fall into the downsides of groupthink, excessive meetings, and slow decision-making.</p>

	PROBLEM TO SOLVE OR TENSION TO MANAGE?
4.	<p><i>Your company is considering a merger with two competitors to form a larger organization. Leaders say it will reduce costs and increase efficiency, but employees fear it could damage your vibrant corporate culture.</i></p> <p><b>Answer:</b></p> <p>This is a <b>Problem to Solve</b>. While there may be strong opinions on both sides, this isn't an ongoing challenge that must be managed over time—it's a one-time decision. At the end of the day, the company will either merge or not merge. Although leaders must weigh financial benefits against risks to culture, this still comes down to a single binary decision.</p>
5.	<p><i>An MBA professor tells his class: "Great leaders should always project confidence and never let them see you sweat."</i></p> <p><b>Answer:</b></p> <p>This is a <b>Tension to Manage</b>. The professor is mistakenly framing confidence as the "right" answer, but effective leadership requires both <b>Confidence AND Humility</b>. Great leaders must confidently project belief in themselves and their vision, yet remain grounded, teachable, and willing to admit mistakes. Overdone confidence without humility leads to arrogance, blind spots, and broken trust. Overdone humility without confidence leaves leaders hesitant, and their teams lose faith in both their vision and their ability to deliver it.</p>
6.	<p><i>The facilities team is deciding whether to retrofit the office with hybrid workspaces or keep the existing cubicles.</i></p> <p><b>Answer:</b></p> <p>This is a <b>Problem to Solve</b>. There are valid arguments for both options—hybrid spaces may encourage flexibility and collaboration, while cubicles can provide focus and privacy. But unlike a tension to manage, this is not an ongoing challenge that resurfaces repeatedly. The team will weigh the factors, make an informed choice, and then move forward. This is the kind of situation where leaders must analyze costs, employee needs, and long-term goals, then choose the best option and move on.</p>
7.	<p><i>You've received complaints about a team member who's been late numerous times this past month. You also know they're going through a painful divorce. Should you enforce consequences or let it slide?</i></p> <p><b>Answer:</b></p> <p>This is a <b>Problem to Solve</b>—though a complex one. Great leaders are constantly managing the tension between expectations and grace. Clear performance standards are essential, yet compassion matters when people are struggling. However, in this case, the leader must still <b>make a performance management decision</b>—whether that means a consequence, an accommodation, or a mix of both. The lateness issue isn't an ongoing, unsolvable challenge; it requires a thoughtful response, action, and closure so everyone can move forward.</p>

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8.	<p><i>A factory manager must decide whether to continue using an old machine that no longer meets updated safety regulations.</i></p> <p><b>Answer:</b></p> <p>This is a <b>Problem to Solve</b>. The manager either replaces the machinery or doesn't—there's no ongoing, cyclical tension to manage here. While both options carry pros and cons (e.g., cost vs. compliance), this isn't a situation where the two sides are equally critical over time. Safety regulations create a clear standard, which means there is a "best" answer: ensuring compliance and protecting workers. Once the decision is made, the issue is resolved, and the team can move forward without it resurfacing as an ongoing challenge.</p>
9.	<p><i>Your CEO kicks off her quarterly town hall by saying: "Our company motto for the new year is CHANGE. It's out with the old and in with the new."</i></p> <p><b>Answer:</b></p> <p>This is a <b>Tension to Manage</b>. The CEO is mistakenly framing change as the ultimate solution, but thriving organizations must embrace both <b>Change AND Stability</b>. Innovation, adaptation, and "out with the old" thinking are vital—yet so are the proven practices, traditions, and values that provide consistency and trust.</p> <p>When leaders lean too far into constant change, the result is confusion, burnout, and lower quality. When they cling only to stability, they risk stagnation and irrelevance. Great leaders recognize that the healthiest organizations continually leverage both sides—driving innovation while staying grounded in what works.</p>
10.	<p><i>Team members are divided about after-hours communication. Some value being responsive when urgent issues arise, even if it means sending a Slack message at 10 p.m. Others feel strongly that work should stay within office hours to protect personal time and wellbeing.</i></p> <p><b>Answer:</b></p> <p>This is a <b>Tension to Manage</b>. At first glance, it might look like a policy problem—just set a rule and move on. But the deeper reality is that leaders (and teams) must continually manage the tension between <b>Work AND Home</b>. Responsiveness and availability are critical when priorities demand it, yet protecting rest and personal time is just as important for long-term engagement and wellbeing.</p> <p>Guidelines are still necessary—for example, clarifying when after-hours messages are appropriate and when they're not. But great leaders recognize that these guidelines must remain <b>flexible and evolving</b>, adapting to the season, workload, and urgency of the moment. If the rules become rigid, they will eventually backfire—either by burning people out or by leaving critical needs unmet.</p>

# SCORING

*Give yourself 1 point for every correct answer.*

<b>SCORE:</b>
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*If your score was between **8-10** points:*

You're doing an excellent job distinguishing between problems to solve and tensions to manage. Way to go! This skill sets you up to lead with clarity, confidence, and impact. It also helps ensure your teams are not only effective but also enjoyable to be part of.

Don't stop here—keep sharpening your ability to leverage healthy tension. Explore the resources on the following page to take your leadership to the next level.

*If your score was between **5-7** points:*

You're on the right track. You can usually tell the difference between a problem and a tension, but there's room to grow. You're likely helping your team succeed, but you may be leaving some potential on the table.

The good news is that with focus and practice, you can easily move from good to great. Use the resources on the following page to deepen your skills and unlock stronger teamwork and results.

*If your score was between **0-4** points:*

You may be treating most challenges as problems to solve, and that can leave your leadership stuck and your teams divided. The bad news is that this limits performance and progress.

The good news? There are simple, practical ways to get unstuck.

**Keep reading**—you'll discover tools that will help you lead more effectively and turn conflict and division into unity and momentum.



# WHAT'S NEXT?

Taking this quiz is just the start.

Here are three ways to keep the leadership development momentum going:

## 1. *Get practical tools (like this) each month*

Sign up for my monthly [newsletter](#)—straightforward insights, actionable tools, and fresh leadership thinking for you and your team.

JOIN THE NEWSLETTER

[timarnold.ca/leaders-edge](http://timarnold.ca/leaders-edge)



## 2. *Read the book that started it all*

If this quiz sparked something for you, you'll love [Lead with AND](#). It dives into the six core tensions every leader must manage—and shows you how to leverage them for resilience and results.

START READING

[amazon.ca/Lead-Secret-Resilience-Results-Polarized/dp/1777901405/](https://amazon.ca/Lead-Secret-Resilience-Results-Polarized/dp/1777901405/)



## 3. *Keep the learning going*

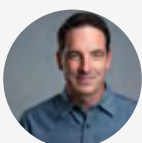
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