# Dimensions of Tension Method Guide
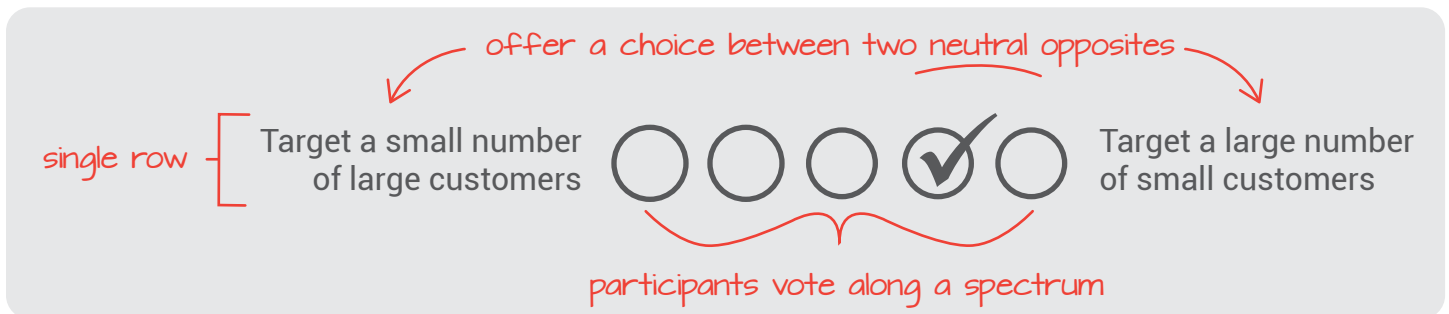
CROWN

## Why surface assumptions?

Often during the early stages of a project, key assumptions are never articulated by the stakeholders. This omission can lead to lost time when it's discovered later that there was misalignment between a key stakeholder and the project team, or across multiple stakeholders. Surfacing assumptions at the outset of a project can save valuable time and resources (and even reshape the project's objective).

## The "Dimensions of Tension" Exercise

Dimensions of Tension is a structured exercise to stimulate discussion and surface assumptions around topics like the strategic rationale, the business opportunity, or the development approach. Importantly, the goal of the exercise is not to reach consensus, but rather, to understand where to focus the team's inquiry and surface issues the team and stakeholders will likely need to wrestle with throughout the project.

## How it works

Participants are asked to determine where to place emphasis when given a choice between a set of neutral opposites. The tool takes the form of a single page or poster where sets of neutral opposites are arranged in rows across a 5-point spectrum. The exercise can be completed live in a workshop, or sent as a survey and discussed later in a meeting to review the combined results.



_offer a choice between two neutral opposites_

_single row_ — Target a small number of large customers ○ ○ ○ ✓ ○ Target a large number of small customers

_participants vote along a spectrum_

## Choosing neutral opposites

The results are most useful when the topics are likely to influence project direction and scope, or relate to goals and expected deliverables. External factors, internal motivators, and the organizational environment are also good sources of critical assumptions. Early one-on-one stakeholder conversations are very useful for inspiring this list.

Generate a list of topics, and group them into sets of neutral opposites. It's okay if you think the project should focus on both, in fact, those pairs often provoke the most fruitful discussion when it turns out not everyone sees it the same way.

### Example "Opposites"

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Products | | Services |
| Build | | Buy |
| Leverage existing capabilities | | Build new capabilities |
| Clarify the opportunity first | VS | Experiment in market |
| Current customers | | New markets |
| Lowest cost | | Premium quality |
| Differentiate through product | | Differentiate through delivery |

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## Facilitating the conversation

Ideally, the exercise is used in a collaborative work session with all stakeholders. Walk through the pairs one-by-one and have participants vote, or ask them to walk up and mark their votes on a large poster.

**General discussion questions**
- Where do we have the most agreement as a group?
- Where do we have the most divergence?
- For each divergence:
  - Is the difference one of staging, rather than a tradeoff? What's the timing?
  - Do we need more information? What & why?
- Are there other polarities this activity has surfaced?

**Reviewing the results**

There are usually four distinct types of results, and each requires a unique response from the facilitator during the collaborative session.

1. **Strong alignment**
   Here, there is significant alignment. This pair can be skipped over and only discussed if time permits.

   (5) (1) ( ) ( ) ( )
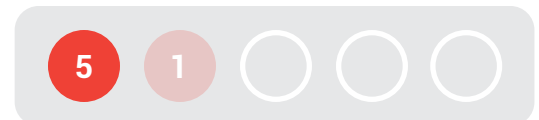
2. **Strong alignment with an outlier**
   Here, one stakeholder diverges from the group. It's key to share the rationale. It may cause the other stakeholders to think differently.

   (5) ( ) ( ) ( ) (1)

3. **No alignment**
   Lack of alignment could result from multiple interpretations of the pair, or from a diverse set of opinions. Is this topic perceived to be very important, or not important at all?

   (2) (1) (1) (1) (1)

4. **Strong divergence**
   Spend time here unpacking the assumptions from each side. Also, ask the group if consensus is important here, and if so, what data is needed to make a decision?

   (3) ( ) ( ) ( ) (3)

## Dialogue, not decisions

The purpose of the exercise is not necessarily finding consensus, particularly in an innovation effort where there is much uncertainty and much to be learned. The objective is to surface initial assumptions and provoke discussion about stakeholder intuition or business constraints that are useful for the team's awareness at the initiation of a project.

## Acknowledgements