

A man in a dark suit, white shirt, and black tie is sitting at a desk. He has his right hand covering his face, with his fingers spread, suggesting stress or frustration. He is looking down and to the right. In the background, there are white window blinds. To the left, another person in a blue suit is partially visible, holding a clipboard. In the foreground, there is a laptop, a colorful ball, and some papers on a wooden desk.

Creative Tension? Or Tension Stress?

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Creative Tension? Or Tension Stress?



Many executives and futurists are saying that the world is experiencing another paradigm shift. A *paradigm* is a mental model of how we see the world and view reality. A *paradigm shift* occurs when our basic view of our world's perspective changes to a new, wider perspective, much like when the inhabitants of the earth realized that the earth rotates around the sun and is not the center of the universe or when masses of people comprehended that the world is round, not flat. Einstein proved all matter is energy and another paradigm was changed, bringing breakthroughs in technology that otherwise would have been impossible.

New breakthroughs in personal productivity can come if a simple paradigm shift is made, a shift from thinking the workday is full of tension stress to realizing that the workday is crammed with *creative tension*, a *good kind of stress*.

Tension can be defined as mental, emotional and nervous strain, or stress tension. Creative tension is the stress that comes from working to solve a problem or find a solution to a nagging problem. It brings breakthroughs in products and services.

To cram your day with creative tension, not tension stress, try this paradigm shift and observe its effect on your workday: Consciously change your paradigm of tension stress which is negative to creative tension which is positive. Creative tension permits stress to be a compelling force to move your work forward. It stretches your intellectual capabilities.

What would happen to your workday if you changed and used this paradigm of tension on even just a few tasks?

Workers who have tried this shift say they feel more relaxed and creative. In this frame of mind, they get more done.

By analyzing your work day and noting the times you felt stressed by the stock market, the financial report, the attitude of the director of marketing, a global competitor, or the new intern and then contrasting that to the times you felt stressed at writing the brief, describing the new product line, explaining the new benefits package, or defining your vision of the future, you will see the two kinds of stress are very different.

The first stress is the normal stress we have felt for centuries and is often described in caveman terms: Harry Caveman meets Lenny, the Saber-toothed tiger and must fight or flee. This stress has you reaching for the Roloids and needing a vacation.

The second kind of stress is the pulling, stretching, compelling tension felt when creating. It is the creative tension of looking for the right word, finding the right metaphor, using the right motivational language. This creative tension is an elating stress. It becomes a defining moment that makes the workday worthwhile and makes you feel self-actualized.

The problem with creative tension from a time management perspective is that the task always takes more time than you probably have allotted in your schedule. If you see the extra time it takes to create an exceptional product as a time waster, something that threw your schedule off, then you will feel tension stress. If, however, you allow time in your schedule to let your mind create, you will feel creative tension, the stress of moving forward and reaching a higher level of performance.

The predictable stages in the creative process as summarized by S. Starker are:

Preparation. This involves identification of the problem, project, what you want to write, or achieve.

Concentrated effort. This includes attempting all the alternative solutions, using your resources, experiencing trial and error.

Frustration. If no solution is found in the previous phase, this is the inevitable result of an expenditure of time and effort with no resolution.

Withdrawal. This includes putting it aside, removing it from the focus of attention. This often helps the unconscious processing.

Insight. Everyone loves the “aha!” moment that seems spontaneous but comes because you returned to the project with fresh perspectives.

Follow through. Nothing is accomplished until you follow through which is the implementation phase or translation of the idea into action.

Creative tension craves resolution, just like hunger and it often wins over hunger. That's why you stay through lunch to "finish up" and feel a sense of calm and satisfaction when you dot the last "i" or put the last line on the engineering drawing.

The essence of increased productivity in your life is to learn how to generate and sustain creative tension in your workday.

As you work through your day, take mental notes of tension stress and creative tension. Work to expand creative tension and decrease tension stress. As you do, you'll experience the quality of your work improving and you'll find yourself doing your life's work and not just doing time.

By Karla Brandau, CSP

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Karla Brandau, CSP is a time management and professional development expert who teaches corporate teams how to maximize productivity to make their organizations soar, and to create more time for living! She is available for team seminars, keynotes and conference breakout sessions.

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