

## **Tension Shifting Guidelines**

**Study this document in order to understand and become familiar with the different stages of a tension shifting meeting.**

**Please see the [Tension Shifting 'Homepage'](#) for further Tension Shifting resources, including minutes template, key considerations for facilitators and an alternative but similar structure suggested by the XR SR Project.**

Around 45- 60 minutes is a good amount of time for the session. If doing Tension Shifting within the same time slot as an operational meeting (e.g: during the second half of a two hour meeting), time needed for opening and closing may vary.

The steps are as follows:

- **Welcome/check in/open** (5 minutes or so)
- 1.) **Check Openness** (up to 5 minutes)
- 2.) **Journaling & Sharing** (approx. 5 minutes)
- 3.) **Sorting & Consent** (up to 5 minutes)
- 4.) **Shifting** (40 minutes-ish, depending on time)
- 4a) **Understanding**
- 4b) **Explore**
- 4c) **Decide/next steps**
- 4d) **Check**
- 5.) **Close** (5 minutes)

### **Welcome/check in/open** (5 minutes or so)

- Check-in (format depending on size of the team) and/or round of celebration for each other/a game.
- Celebrating might feel cringey/awkward, particularly if people aren't used to doing it, but it can be super helpful for collaborating, and it's nice to do something positive before discussing what could be more difficult.

### 1) **Check Openness** (up to 5 minutes)

- The purpose of this step is for group members to get a sense of how open they are to receiving feedback during the meeting. If someone has expressed that they are not that open to receiving feedback today (perhaps because they are feeling stressed, or otherwise overwhelmed), then it might be better to cover any tensions relating specifically to that person at a later date.
- **Ask everyone to show with their fingers 1-5, how available and open are you to receive feedback in this meeting?**
- Say something that acknowledges the responses from the group, eg. as a facilitator, you're noticing there's a broad spectrum of openness within the group today, or if there's a general sense of most people being on the same level of openness.
- Open up the space and check if there's anything anyone would like to share about their level of openness, or something they want to say in order to be more present or feel more connected.
- If you're noticing that you or someone does not seem to feel supported enough to talk about their tension, try pairing up to talk through tensions 1-1 outside the meeting and support each other to bring them to the bigger group.

### 2) **Journaling & Sharing** (approx. 5 minutes)

- The purpose of this step is to give people a chance to recall any tensions that have come up, and for group members to be aware of what tensions are existing currently within the group.
- Give everyone 5 minutes to journal about any tensions that have come up in the last week.
  - Even if you think that you don't have any tensions, or that they're not 'big or important enough', take a moment to reflect and remember that someone else might be sharing the same tension or feel a 'shared dilemma' with your tension.

- If you have a big team (more than 5 people present) ask them to: Identify the biggest one.
- Otherwise they could each identify 3 tensions.
- Ask people to write a 'headline summary' of the tension they would like to shift, along with their name, into the [minutes doc](#) so that everyone can see a short list of people's main tensions, or find another way for each tension to be made visible to the rest of the group. E.g: someone may write: 'Josh: Tension about messages in Whatsapp', 'Kane: Security concern', 'Jemima: Recruitment', or 'T: Feeling overwhelmed and confused' - it's just to get a sense of what the tension is, with the exploration coming later.
- If you find something as you're doing your journaling that feels too big for this meeting, you might park it and at a later point see if the [Conflict First Aid](#) steps could work, and if not, seek support from [conflict@rebellion.earth](mailto:conflict@rebellion.earth), before or instead of bringing it to a tension shifting meeting.

### 3) **Sorting & Consent** (5 minutes or so)

- The purpose of this step is to decide which tensions to address first during the meeting. This should be done by the facilitator, with a consensus and input from the group.
- If there are many tensions, you may not be able to get through all of them during the meeting, so it may be necessary to prioritise. If using a minutes doc that everyone is writing on, you could use numbers to indicate level of tension, e.g: 1-4, 1 being urgent/important, 4 being not urgent/important, and then order them in the document accordingly.
- You may like to try categorising the tensions. This can help inform which to address first, or may just help to contextualise the tension. Categories may include: Emergency / High Tensions, Tensions Regarding Group Functioning, Tensions around strategy, Any informational feedback about instances of implicit bias or unconscious practices that reproduce oppression or marginalisation, or interpersonal tensions. Tensions between just one or two people can be dealt

with outside of this meeting, if possible, simply for efficiency, though sometimes you may wish to cover these in tension shifting. See [here](#) for more info on this.

- This [alternative Tension Shifting template](#) contains further suggestions around categorising tensions.
- Working on a shared minutes doc can help this stage, and may allow the facilitator to rely to a greater extent on the group, who can edit the document together.
- While doing the sorting, the facilitator asks everyone to read through each others' tensions. When reading other people's tensions, people may wish to de-prioritise, or prioritise their own tensions.
- If necessary, the facilitator, or another member can invite somebody to say a few more words about their tension, where clarification of the 'headline summary' is needed.
- Sometimes tensions are felt by the whole group or brought by several people. If using the minutes doc, you could invite people to place their name/initial next to any tension brought by someone else that they also feel. If multiple people are feeling the same tension, you may like to prioritise it.
- Take into consideration people's open-ness from earlier. Check in with people again if in doubt about their willingness to explore a given tension.
- It is also important that the facilitator(s) check with the person/people bringing the tension and anyone directly involved in it if they are willing to explore it in this meeting.
  - The facilitator ideally will carefully ask the person/people who might be receiving a tension felt by others whether they feel OK to talk about this in this context, or whether they might prefer to speak about it in a separate meeting where they might feel less exposed, or have time to prepare themselves, and whether they would like more support.

- If you can, try to be very supportive of anyone who might be feeling vulnerable, upset or fearful in any way, and bear in mind any power dynamics which might make things harder for some people.
- The team could have a group agreement to commit to addressing tensions when they have surfaced and how they can support each other to be resourced enough to address the tensions.
- The facilitator proposes in which order the tensions will be dealt with and checks consent from the rest of the team. Once the order is confirmed, move on to the next step.

#### 4) **Shifting** (40 minutes-ish, depending on time)

- This is the part of the session where you actually address or shift the tensions that are there.
- For each tension the team goes through the 4 step process below, with the aim of getting to a place where something has shifted.
- Make sure to schedule in some room for breaks too so that people feel good in their bodies, try to notice when might be a good time, so that people are not losing capacity to listen in the middle of someone's tension sharing.
- This [alternative tension shifting guide](#) proposes a different way of achieving the same thing, and is worthwhile to read/adopt.
- Remember that Tension Shifting is not about assigning blame or finding out who is wrong or at fault.
- It's also not necessarily about resolving all tensions there and then, though sometimes this is possible. Where tensions still exist at the end of the session, hopefully they are at least eased a little bit, and the person feels heard and understood.

#### Step 4a) **Understanding**

- The purpose of this stage is for the group to understand what the tension is, and also for the person bringing the tension to *feel* understood. Don't underestimate the importance of this feeling.
- Ask the person bringing the tension to share a bit more about it while the others listen without interrupting. They may like to practice [deep listening](#).
- If it feels emotionally charged for the person, extend your empathy.
- Give a space for people in the team to ask clarifying questions (not to try to come up with solutions yet) to deepen their understanding of what is going on for the person.
- If you as the facilitator get the impression that someone is not feeling heard or understood by the team...
  - Try to capture yourself what the person is saying by reflecting back to them what you heard (active listening)
  - Try to capture what the person is feeling and/or needing, so the person feels understood
    - “So you're feeling frustrated with the way that the team is making decisions and you really would like to have some clarity and feel included, is that right?”
  - Ask someone else in the team to say what they are hearing / understood.
  - Always check with the person if the guesses are correct ‘...is that right?’ (questionmark!)
- At the end, you can ask them ‘do you feel that we've understood you? If the answer is yes, move on to the next step.

#### Step 4b) **Explore**

- The purpose of this step is to explore as a team what might help to ease the tension. The person bringing the tension may have suggestions, and so might others in the group.
- It may be that simply talking about the tension has shifted it, so do check in with people to see if they need/want anything to happen.
- What ideas might meet the needs?
- For example:
  - Extra support with workload/specific tasks (arrange who will do this)
  - Arranging a wider conversation to happen at a later date.
  - Making an agreement as a group (could be done during the meeting, if quick/simple, or added to a future agenda)
  - Changing roles/mandates or ways of working
  - Handing back tasks
  - Please see this [alternative tension shifting guide](#) for further suggestions
- Once an acceptable way forwards seems to have presented itself, move on to the next step

#### Step 4c) **Decide/next steps**

- The purpose of this step is to see what can be done to address the tension. It may be that simply talking about the tension has shifted it, so do check in with people to see if they need/want anything to happen.
- This is where you may like to create action points/agreements, or other next steps e.g: 'we will change x, y and z', or 'we will arrange to talk about this as a priority'.
- You may like to ensure that any agreements/action points made are **S.M.A.R.T.** i.e. Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time Bound, as well as, where

relevant, assigned to somebody, and minuted correctly, in order for accountability in the future.

- If you don't have time during the tension shifting meeting, you may like to create more time at a later date. It can be helpful to arrange that (or decide when you will arrange it!) during the meeting, so that the person bringing the tension can rest assured that it is in hand and won't be forgotten.

#### Step 4d) **Check**

- How does the person who brought the tension feel now?
- Some helpful questions to explore this can be:
  - Is there a sense of movement about addressing this?
  - Does it feel shifted, or less stuck?
  - Is it sufficient enough to just see, and let it arise again if there is more tension?
  - Or is it that the team wants to actually 'check on it' and review the actions at some point in time? If so, agree on when and who will take on this action point and 'track' it on behalf of the team.
- While this process is designed to shift tensions, when there are big tensions, a single meeting might not be able to address them. If you've had a good go at addressing something, but it doesn't seem to be shifting, it might be best to move on and come back to it at a later, potentially defined, date, or to arrange a dedicated space to explore it more thoroughly.
- **When and if a tension feels shifted, move onto the next tension, repeating stage 4a, b, c and d for each one.**

#### 5) **Close (5 minutes)**

- Have a review of the APs & Agreements that have been reached in the meeting.



- Put any tensions you didn't get to shift into the agenda for the next Tension Shifting Meeting.
- Is there any support needed for anyone after the meeting?
- Celebrate! This can be a lovely way to end (or begin!) a meeting that can involve some difficult topics. E.g: go round and say one thing you appreciate/enjoy about working in the group/a specific group member/something else.
- Check out