

# The Culture Tensions Starter Guide

Five everyday tensions that quietly shape how work gets done

## Culture Science Cards

*Making culture visible. Making conversations easier.*



## Introduction

Culture rarely shows up as extreme behaviour.

More often, it shows up in small, everyday choices people make — especially when work becomes demanding, uncertain, or pressured.

Do we push through, or pause and check in?

Do we challenge an idea, or keep things harmonious?

Do we experiment, or stick with what's familiar?

Over time, these choices shape “how things are done around here”.

This guide introduces **five common culture tensions** that many teams and organisations experience. They're not problems to be solved or traits to be judged. They're **trade-offs** — and how they're handled has a significant impact on performance, wellbeing, and trust.

The aim of this guide is simple:

**to make these tensions easier to see, name, and talk about.**

## Why Culture Shows Up as Tensions

Most organisations don't struggle with intent.

They want:

- strong performance *and* healthy people
- collaboration *and* accountability
- learning *and* high standards

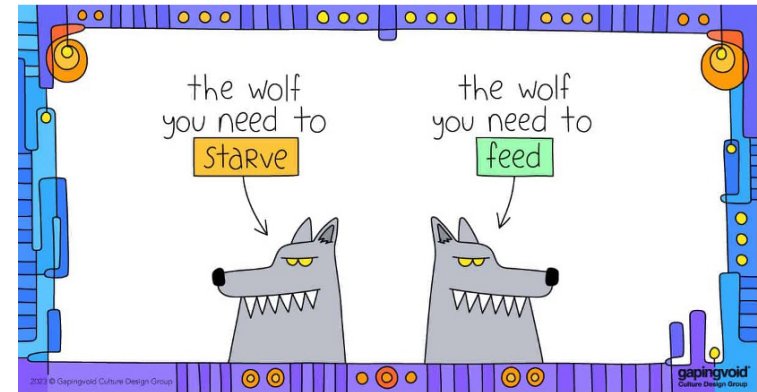
The challenge is that, in practice, these things can pull in different directions.

When time is short or pressure is high, people don't debate values. They default to what feels safest, most familiar, or most rewarded. Over time, those defaults become patterns.

That's why culture is best understood not as "good or bad", but as **what tends to win when priorities collide**.

These tensions exist in every organisation. What differs is:

- which side dominates under pressure
- whether the tension can be discussed openly
- and whether people feel able to rebalance when needed



There's a famous Cherokee myth about good and evil. As it goes.

An old man was teaching his grandson about life.

"There's a battle going on inside every human heart," he said, "between the good wolf and the evil wolf."

"Grandfather," the child says, "Which wolf wins in the end?"

"The one you feed," says the grandfather.

This guide is designed to support **reflection and conversation**, not diagnosis.

You can use it:

- on your own, as a prompt for thinking
- with a team, to surface shared experiences
- with leaders, to explore how culture feels in practice

For each tension, you'll find:

- a description of both sides
- common experiences teams report
- a small set of reflection questions

There are no right answers.

The value lies in noticing patterns — and talking about them.



## Tension 1: People ↔ Performance

### What this tension is about

Balancing care for people with the pressure to deliver results.

### When performance dominates

- Work pushes on regardless of capacity
- Wellbeing is acknowledged, but deferred
- Effort and sacrifice are quietly rewarded

### When people dominate

- Difficult conversations are avoided
- Standards drift
- Accountability becomes unclear

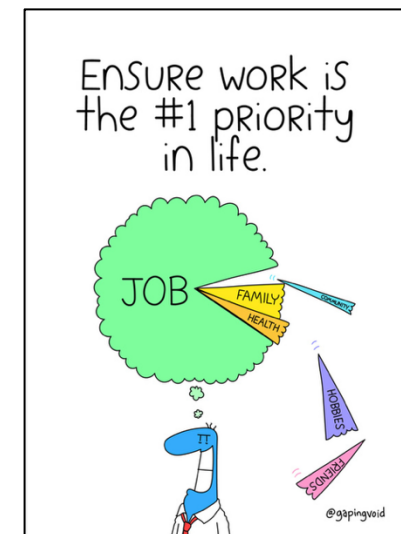
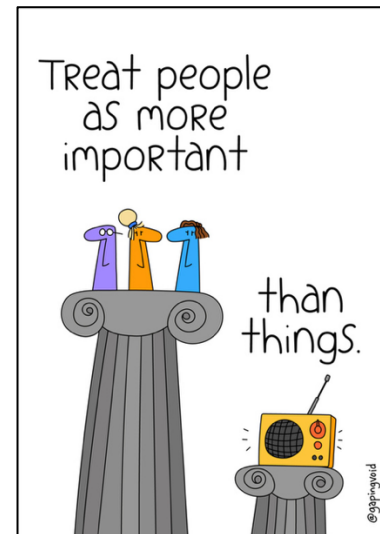
### What teams often feel

“We care about people — but things are busy right now.”

“It’s just a tough period... again.”

### Questions to reflect on

- When things get busy, what tends to be prioritised first?
- What do people sacrifice — energy, quality, safety or care?
- What behaviour is most likely to be praised under pressure?



## Tension 2: Collaboration ↔ Competition

### What this tension is about

How success is defined and rewarded.

### When collaboration dominates

- Shared goals matter
- People help one another succeed
- Respect is non-negotiable

### When competition dominates

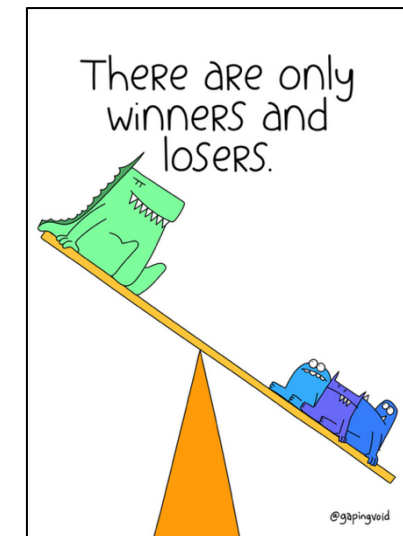
- Visibility matters more than contribution
- Peers become rivals
- There are quiet winners and losers

### What teams often feel

“We talk about teamwork, but it still feels like a contest.”

### Questions to reflect on

- What actually helps people get ahead here?
- Where do silos or politics show up?
- How safe is it to share credit or ask for help?



## Tension 3: Learning ↔ Perfection

### What this tension is about

Whether mistakes are treated as information or failure.

### When learning dominates

- Curiosity is encouraged
- Experimentation is normal
- Feedback supports growth

### When perfection dominates

- Errors are avoided or hidden
- Scrutiny is high
- It's safer not to try

### What teams often feel

"It's better not to get it wrong."

"We learn... quietly."

### Questions to reflect on

- How are mistakes usually responded to?
- What happens when something doesn't work?
- What do people learn from failure here?



## Tension 4: Care ↔ Control

### What this tension is about

How trust and responsibility are distributed.

### When care dominates

- Responsibility is shared
- People are trusted to think and decide
- Support is visible

### When control dominates

- Decisions move upward
- Oversight increases
- Leaders feel they need to stay on top of everything

### What teams often feel

“Decisions take longer than they should.”

“Responsibility doesn’t always sit where the work is.”

### Questions to reflect on

- Where does accountability really sit?
- What feels risky to let go of?
- What happens when someone takes initiative?



## Tension 5: Safety ↔ Challenge

What this tension is about

Balancing respect with honest disagreement.

When safety dominates

- Relationships are protected
- Harmony is valued
- Issues stay unspoken

When challenge dominates

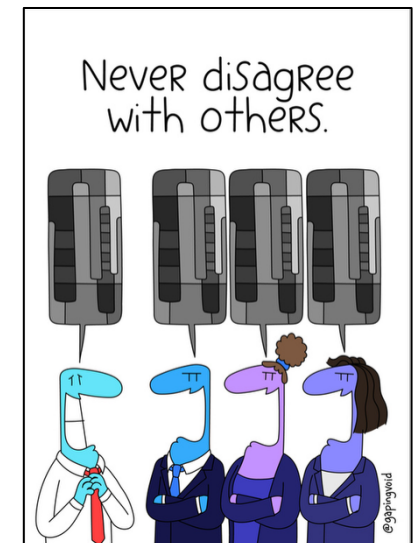
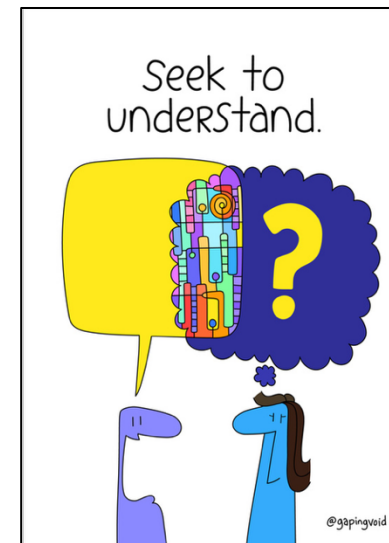
- Directness is normal
- Debate is encouraged
- Conflict can feel personal

What teams often feel

“Everyone agrees in the meeting... then talks later.”

Questions to reflect on

- What’s harder here: speaking up or being wrong?
- How does disagreement usually land?
- What does it cost to challenge the status quo?



# Working With Tensions Well

High-performing cultures don't eliminate tensions.

They:

- notice them early
- talk about them openly
- and adjust intentionally

That requires a shared way to describe what's happening — without blaming individuals or oversimplifying complex situations. One of the reasons we've been developing **Culture Science Cards** is to support exactly these kinds of conversations. The cards provide a visual, behaviour-based language that helps people point to patterns they recognise, rather than struggle to explain how something feels.

This guide offers a starting point.

The real value comes when teams can see these tensions clearly and talk about them together.

## A Final Thought

If these tensions feel familiar, that's not a failure.  
It's a sign you're paying attention.

Culture doesn't change through slogans or good intentions alone.  
It changes when people can see what's really shaping behaviour — and have the confidence to talk about it.  
**Culture Science Cards** exist to help make that possible.

### **Culture Science Cards**

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