
FRAMEWORK · COMPANION · V1.0

Tensions, and why they are not risks

Bearing west · Fourth piece · PDCA+ v2.0 · Public Review

Most organisations treat cultural concerns as risks and address them through general awareness training. The treatment is well-intentioned and structurally inadequate, and the reasons it is inadequate point to a different category of organisational concern — tensions — that needs different handling.

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A structural piece on category, sequence, and the conditions under which directional rather than general communication becomes possible · mirrors the second-order observation piece in the East bearing (Cybernetics)

Why this piece exists

This piece is about a category error that most organisations make in good faith and at significant cost. The error is treating tensions as if they were risks, and treating cultural concerns — which are almost always tensions — as if they could be mitigated through training. The category error is structural, not personal; it reflects how organisations are equipped to handle concerns about future states, and how the equipment they have is poorly matched to the concerns they actually face when culture is the subject.

The piece is written with awareness that most readers will have themselves built, commissioned, or sat through an awareness LMS course at some point, and that the failures of the form are not failures of the people who built it. The course-builder is doing the best thing available within the apparatus they have. The argument of this piece is not that the work was wrong; it is that the work was being asked to do something structurally beyond what its apparatus can do. A different apparatus — one PDCA+ supports — is available, and the difference is worth seeing.

This piece mirrors the second-order observation piece in the East bearing (Cybernetics) of this series. Both are about something a framework can do that the conventional apparatus structurally cannot. Second-order observation is the framework observing its own observing apparatus. Tension monitoring is the framework observing standing conditions that are not events. Both require seeing what the risk-management framing cannot see by construction, and both become available when the substrate is rich enough to support directional rather than general response.

How we got here: the background

Organisations have inherited risk management as their main apparatus for handling concerns about future states. The apparatus is well-developed, has clear vocabulary, comes with mature tooling, and benefits from professional bodies and standards that articulate how it should be done. ISO 31000 alone is the work of decades of refinement. When something concerns leadership — when a future event is feared, when an exposure becomes visible, when a stakeholder raises an issue — the most readily available institutional response is to treat it as a risk and apply the risk-management apparatus to it. This is not a failing; it is the natural consequence of having one well-developed tool and a steady supply of concerns that need handling.

The trouble starts when concerns arrive that do not have the shape of risks. Most cultural concerns are like this. A leader notices that two teams are not collaborating well, or that decisions are being made too slowly, or that a particular kind of feedback is rarely heard. The concern is real. The apparatus available is the risk-management one. The concern enters the risk-management apparatus, is treated as a risk, and the apparatus does what it does — analyses likelihood and impact, proposes treatments, commits to monitoring. The treatment, for cultural concerns, is almost always some combination of training, communication, and

policy clarification. Awareness courses are the most scalable form of training; LMS platforms make them deliverable; the course gets built; the risk is treated.

This sequence happens hundreds of times a year in any large organisation. The people involved are competent, well-meaning, and doing exactly what their institutional context invites them to do. The outcome is a steady accumulation of awareness courses addressing cultural concerns. Some of them produce measurable change. Most of them do not. The ones that do not are often quietly noticed by everyone in the organisation, who has now sat through a course that did not speak to where they actually stand on the issue, and concluded that the organisation has performed its ritual response without addressing the underlying matter.

This is the background story. It is not anyone's fault. It is what happens when you have a hammer that is genuinely useful for nails, and someone hands you a screw, and you have been trained to recognise everything as a nail because the hammer is what you have. The piece that follows is about what the screw actually is, and what it would take to address it without pretending it is a nail.

THE BACKGROUND, IN ONE SENTENCE

Treating cultural concerns as risks and addressing them through awareness courses is the structurally available response when risk management is the only well-developed apparatus an organisation has. It is what competent people do under those conditions. Recognising why it falls short is the first move toward something different.

Risks and tensions: the category distinction

A risk is an uncertainty about a future event. The event has a likelihood — the probability of its occurrence — and an impact — the consequence if it occurs. A risk can be analysed by characterising both. It can be treated by reducing likelihood (preventing the event), reducing impact (limiting consequence if it occurs), transferring it (insurance, contractual allocation), or accepting it (proceeding with the exposure deliberately). It can be monitored by observing whether the conditions that determine likelihood or impact are changing.

A tension is something different. A tension is a structural condition in which two or more legitimate concerns pull in different directions and cannot both be fully satisfied at the same time. Speed and quality are in tension; centralisation and local autonomy are in tension; transparency and confidentiality are in tension; psychological safety and accountability are in tension; standardisation and contextual judgement are in tension. The list is long, and every reader will recognise themselves on multiple items.

Tensions do not have likelihoods because they are not events. They are standing conditions. They are present every day, in every operational situation, in every decision the organisation makes. They do not occur; they exist.

Tensions do not have impacts in the risk sense because their "impact" is the cost of whichever direction you do not take, and that cost depends on who you ask. The engineer who is constrained by heavy process experiences process as costly. The compliance officer who

watches process being bypassed experiences the bypass as costly. Both are correct about their own experience of the tension. Neither is producing a number that can be combined with the other into a single "impact" the apparatus can act on.

Tensions cannot be mitigated in the risk sense, because mitigating one side intensifies the other. A response that increases process intensity reduces the engineer's productivity. A response that loosens process intensity increases the compliance officer's exposure. There is no treatment that reduces the tension; every treatment is a choice of which side of the tension to be on, and the chosen side has its own costs that have to be carried.

Property	Risk	Tension
Form	An uncertain future event	A standing structural condition
Has likelihood?	Yes — probability of occurrence	No — present continuously
Has impact?	Yes — magnitude of consequence	No single number; depends on whose stake
Treatment	Reduce likelihood, reduce impact, transfer, accept	Choose a position on the tension; carry the cost of that position
Effect of treatment	Residual exposure is smaller	One side strengthens; the other weakens
Monitoring	Downstream of treatment; watches the residual	Upstream of everything; the tension's shape is what subsequent decisions rest on
Stable between observations?	Usually yes	Shifts continuously with conditions

The two categories are genuinely different, and the apparatus for handling one is structurally wrong for the other. Risk management applied to risks works well. Risk management applied to tensions produces predictable failures — treatments that one side of the tension experiences as imposed and the other side experiences as inadequate, monitoring that observes the residual of a treatment whose underlying condition was never event-shaped to begin with, residuals that do not stabilise because the tension keeps shifting.

THE CATEGORY DISTINCTION, IN ONE SENTENCE

Risks are events to be made less likely or less consequential; tensions are standing conditions in which legitimate concerns pull against each other and cannot both be satisfied at once. The apparatus that handles the first is structurally wrong for the second, and applying it produces predictable failures that the apparatus itself cannot diagnose.

Why the common awareness course fails

Most cultural concerns reach the LMS course as their final treatment. The course presents the issue, names the desired behaviour, illustrates the wrong behaviour, asks the learner to acknowledge the material. The form is mature, the delivery is efficient, and the audit trail is

clean. The course satisfies the apparatus that commissioned it. It rarely changes the cultural reality it was commissioned to address.

The reasons for this are structural and worth naming precisely, because they are not about course-builder skill or learner engagement. They are about what the course form can and cannot do.

Reason one: the learners stand in different positions on the tension

A cultural concern that arrives at the apparatus is, almost always, a tension that has become visible. The organisation has noticed that two things it cares about are pulling against each other. The course speaks to the concern with a general framing — usually something like "here is the right balance, here is how to find it, here are the wrong patterns to avoid." The framing is one framing, the same framing, for every learner.

But every learner comes to the tension from a different position. Some are too far toward one side; for them, the corrective is to move toward the other side. Some are too far toward the other side; for them, the corrective is the opposite. A common framing speaks to no one accurately. The learner who was already moderate finds the message obvious and trivial; the learner who was on one side finds the message either confirmatory of what they already believed or directly contrary to it depending on which side the framing tilts toward; the learner who needed the opposite correction finds the message unhelpful or actively wrong for their situation.

This is the structural reason general framing fails for tensions. The tension's resolution, for each individual, requires a directional response — a corrective in the direction they need to move, given where they currently stand. A common course cannot tell two learners to move in opposite directions, and a tension that splits the population is exactly the situation where opposite directions is what is needed.

Reason two: the apparatus that commissioned the course has already mishandled the category

Before the course was built, the cultural concern was treated as a risk and routed through the risk-management apparatus. The treatment proposal that emerged — the course — was selected because the apparatus knows how to commission training as a risk treatment. The choice of treatment was constrained by the apparatus's available moves, not by what the underlying concern actually required.

Had the concern been recognised as a tension, the response would not have started with a course. It would have started with monitoring — observing the tension's shape, its triggers, the conditions under which it intensifies and releases. The course, if it came at all, would have come much later, after the tension had been characterised and absorbability evaluated. The apparatus mishandled the category at step one, and every subsequent step inherited the mishandling.

Reason three: the course produces compliance with itself, not change in the tension

Course completion is what the apparatus measures. The learner clicks through the course, answers the quiz, acknowledges the policy. The apparatus records compliance. The tension that prompted the course remains exactly where it was. The apparatus has succeeded in its own terms — the risk has been treated, the evidence exists — without affecting the condition the apparatus was applied to. This is not a course-design failure; it is what happens when a treatment is applied to a category mismatch. The measure works; the matter is not addressed.

WHY THE COURSE FORM FAILS FOR TENSIONS

The course's general framing speaks to none of the learners accurately, because each learner stands in a different position on the underlying tension and would need a different direction to move. The apparatus that produced the course had already misclassified the concern at intake. The course succeeds in its own measurement and leaves the tension untouched.

The right sequence: monitor first, evaluate next, treat last (if at all)

If a cultural concern is recognised as a tension at intake, a different sequence becomes available. The sequence is not the risk sequence reordered; it is structurally different, and the order matters because each step depends on what the previous step produced.

- 1. Monitor the tension.** The first move is observation, not treatment. A tension cannot be characterised in advance; its shape, its triggers, its rhythms, the conditions under which it intensifies and releases — all of these become known only by watching the tension operate over time. The monitoring has to be substantial enough to capture variation, structured enough to be communicable, and sustained enough that the tension's actual behaviour becomes visible rather than its episodic manifestations. Most organisations skip this step entirely; they jump to treatment because the apparatus is geared for it. Without monitoring, every subsequent step rests on guesses.
- 2. Evaluate absorbability.** With monitoring data in hand, the question becomes whether the tension is one the organisation can absorb as a closed system — meaning, whether the tension lives within boundaries the organisation can act on, or whether it depends on conditions outside the organisation's control. An absorbable tension is potentially treatable through traditional means once it is well-understood. An unabsorbable tension — one driven by conditions beyond the organisation's boundary — cannot be treated by any internal intervention; it can only be lived with, navigated consciously, and made visible to those who need to act within it. The evaluation step is what distinguishes these two categories, and getting it wrong in either direction is consequential.
- 3. Treatment, conditionally.** If the tension is absorbable and well-characterised, traditional treatment moves become available — structural changes, process design, communication that is directional rather than general, role clarifications, decision-rights adjustments. But these moves are now informed by the monitoring data and the

absorbability evaluation; they are calibrated to the tension's actual shape rather than to its first appearance. If the tension is not absorbable, treatment is the wrong move; what is needed instead is sustained communication, navigation, and the organisational capacity to operate within the tension over time.

- 4. Continuous monitoring of any treatment chosen.** If treatment is chosen, the monitoring does not stop. Tensions shift; treatments are calibrated to the tension's state at the time they were designed; a treatment that worked at one moment may stop working as the tension shifts. This is structurally different from risk treatment, where the residual is relatively stable between observations. For tensions, the treatment's appropriateness has to be re-evaluated as the tension evolves, and the monitoring is what makes this re-evaluation possible.

The compensating-control trap

There is a specific failure mode in this sequence worth naming, because it is one most organisations have experienced without recognising what they were experiencing.

When an organisation puts a compensating control in place for what it has classified as a risk (but which is actually a tension), the control is calibrated to the tension's state at the moment of design. The control is now operating against a moving condition. If the tension shifts — because circumstances changed, because the underlying concerns rebalanced, because the operational reality evolved — the compensating control is now operating against a tension that has different properties from the one it was designed for.

The control may now be making things worse. It may be suppressing a side of the tension that has become the beneficial side under the new conditions. It may be amplifying a side of the tension that has become the dominant one. The control has become a risk in its own right — and worse, a risk that is invisible to the apparatus, because the control was put in place to address something that no longer has the shape it had when the control was designed. The apparatus continues to operate the control, congratulates itself for having the control, and the control's effect on the organisation is now perverse rather than helpful.

This is why the monitoring of tensions has to be ongoing rather than one-time, and why any treatment of a tension has to be continuously re-evaluated. The risk apparatus's normal cadence — design, deploy, periodically review — is wrong for tensions because tensions do not hold still for the periodic review to find them at the same place as when the control was deployed.

THE COMPENSATING-CONTROL TRAP

A compensating control put in place to address a misclassified tension is calibrated to the tension's state at the moment of design. As the tension shifts, the control's effect can invert — what was helpful becomes harmful — and the apparatus that operates the control has no way to see this because it was not designed to see tensions in the first place.

What PDCA+ contributes: context establishment and the conjunction

The sequence described in §4 is structurally achievable for any organisation that recognises tensions as a separate category. It does not require PDCA+. What PDCA+ contributes is the substrate that makes the sequence operationally tractable across many tensions, across many disciplines, across the kinds of organisations where tensions accumulate faster than informal handling can keep up with them.

Context establishment as the structural ground

Context establishment is the strand at which a discipline determines what it is operating on, within what scope, against what criteria, with what dependencies. The whitepaper described this as the activity by which a discipline names its operating ground before it begins acting. For tensions, context establishment does work that no other strand can do: it captures where each individual, each role, each operational situation stands relative to the tension at this moment.

A flat risk process has no context layer. It treats every concern as the same shape, raised by anyone, in any situation, with the same response — analyse, treat, accept, monitor. The flatness is what makes it scalable and what makes it structurally unable to address tensions. There is no place in the apparatus for "this concern, raised by this person, from this position on the tension, in this operational context." The information is collapsed at intake.

An operational architecture with depth — which PDCA+ describes structurally — carries the contextual information through the work. The substrate holds, for each discipline, where its operations stand, what positions its operators occupy, what tensions its work is exposed to. When a concern arises, the substrate already holds the context that makes the concern legible as a directional matter rather than a general one. Treatment, if it comes, can be calibrated to the position the concern was raised from.

This is the difference between asking "what is the answer to this cultural concern?" — a question that produces general answers — and asking "given where this person stands on this tension at this moment, what would help them move in the direction they need to move?" — a question that produces directional answers. The flat apparatus can ask only the first question. The substrate makes the second question askable.

The conjunction's surfacing of tensions as patterns

Individual tensions experienced by individual people are often invisible to organisational apparatus. One person complaining that process is too heavy is a complaint. Two people complaining is a coincidence. Two hundred people each adjusting their behaviour to work around a process is a pattern, and the pattern is the tension becoming visible.

The conjunction's continuous observation of what flows through the substrate is structurally suited to noticing patterns. When the same kind of inadequacy surfaces across many disciplines, many operational situations, many individuals — that pattern is what the conjunction is built to see. A tension that has been invisible because no single instance was

loud enough becomes visible because the substrate aggregates the instances and the conjunction observes the aggregate.

This is structurally analogous to the second-order observation work the East bearing (Cybernetics) of this series describes. The conjunction observes its own observing apparatus to detect when categories are drifting; it also observes its own operational flows to detect tensions that no single observation would surface. The same substrate property — continuous observation across many flows — supports both. Where second-order observation makes the framework's own model drift visible, tension monitoring makes the organisation's own structural conditions visible. The framework was not built specifically for tension monitoring; tension monitoring is what its substrate makes possible.

Directional rather than general communication

When a tension has been monitored and characterised, and the substrate holds the context for each operational situation, the communication of cultural concerns can become directional. The compliance officer who has been pulled too far toward heavy process gets a different message than the engineer who has been pushing too hard against process. The senior leader who is enforcing a particular position gets context about how that position is landing in the operational reality. The new hire who is calibrating where to stand gets framing that fits their position rather than an averaged framing that fits no one.

This does not require giving each individual a custom course. It requires the substrate to hold enough about each situation that communication can be addressed to the situation rather than to the average. PDCA+ does not specify what this directional communication looks like — that is the work of HR, of organisational design, of leadership practice. What it provides is the substrate that makes the directional framing possible to compute. Without the substrate, the only thing computable is the average, and the average is what the LMS course is built around.

WHAT THE FRAMEWORK CONTRIBUTES

Context establishment carries the positional information that lets concerns be addressed directionally rather than generally. The conjunction's continuous observation surfaces tensions as patterns the apparatus can act on. The substrate makes directional response computable; without it, only the average is computable, and the average is what general courses are built around.

What changes for organisational practice

If tensions are recognised as a separate category from risks, and the sequence in §4 is adopted, several aspects of organisational practice change. None of these is a prescription; each is a recognition of what becomes available when the category is properly distinguished.

Cultural concerns route differently at intake

When a cultural concern is raised, the first question becomes whether it is a risk (an event that may occur) or a tension (a standing condition). This is a quick assessment, not a deep analysis, and it can be made by anyone who has the category vocabulary. If it is a risk, the risk apparatus handles it. If it is a tension, it enters the monitoring stream first, not the treatment apparatus. This routing decision is the highest-leverage move available; everything downstream depends on getting it right.

The compliance function gains a new instrument

The compliance function in most organisations has only the risk-treatment apparatus available to it. With tensions as a recognised category, the function gains a second instrument — the tension-monitoring and characterisation work — that does not displace risk management but extends what the function can address coherently. Cultural concerns that previously fell on the function with no good way to address them can now be routed to the tension stream. The function does more work, but the work is structurally appropriate to its inputs.

The HR / people function shifts toward directional communication

HR functions that have been delivering general awareness training as their primary cultural intervention can shift, when the substrate is in place, toward directional communication. The shift is gradual — substrate maturity has to grow, the function has to develop new competencies, leaders have to be brought along. But the direction is clear: less mass-produced courseware, more situated communication, with the substrate holding the situational information that makes the communication addressable.

Leadership's relationship to cultural concerns matures

Leaders who have been frustrated by cultural concerns that seemed to resist treatment can develop a more accurate model of why. Some concerns are tensions, not risks; some tensions are absorbable, others are not; absorbable tensions need monitoring and characterisation before treatment, not training as a first response. The leadership conversation about culture changes from "what is the answer" to "what is the shape of this, and what response is appropriate to that shape." This is a substantively different conversation, and it tends to produce substantively different action.

Audit and assurance can finally see tensions

Audit functions evaluating cultural programmes have historically had no good vocabulary for distinguishing programmes that successfully addressed risks from programmes that performed ritual responses to tensions. With the category distinction in place and the substrate holding the relevant patterns, audit can ask substantively different questions — was this concern a risk or a tension; if a tension, was it monitored; if monitored, was absorbability evaluated; if evaluated as absorbable, was the treatment calibrated to the monitoring? These questions cannot be asked of programmes that have not made the category distinction, but they can be asked productively of programmes that have.

Limits and honest framing

Three honest acknowledgements before closing.

First, this piece is not arguing that risk management is wrong. Risk management is good at what it does. The argument is that risk management has been asked to do work it is structurally not suited for, and that recognising tensions as a separate category restores risk management to its proper scope rather than displacing it. An organisation that gets the category distinction right will run a better risk-management programme, not a smaller one, because the apparatus will be operating on inputs it can actually handle.

Second, the piece is not arguing that LMS courses are useless. Courses are good at what they do — they deliver knowledge at scale, they document acknowledgement, they fulfil regulatory requirements that demand training delivery. They are simply not the right primary response to tensions, and recognising this allows them to be used where they actually help while other instruments are used where they are needed.

Third, the substrate that makes tension monitoring tractable is not free. Building the contextual depth that lets directional response become possible requires the same kind of substrate work the rest of this series has described — schemas, taxonomies, translation rules, continuous observation, control management as a shared capability. An organisation that has not built this substrate cannot suddenly start doing directional response by deciding to. The capability requires the underlying structure. Recognising the category distinction is the first step, not the only step.

8 Closing

Tensions are not risks. Cultural concerns are mostly tensions. The apparatus most organisations have for handling concerns is built for risks. The mismatch produces predictable failures — general awareness courses applied to tensions that needed directional response, compensating controls calibrated to tensions that subsequently shifted, audit trails that record treatment without recording effect. Each of these failures is structural, not personal, and each becomes diagnosable once the category distinction is in place.

The right sequence for tensions is monitor first, evaluate absorbability second, treat conditionally third, and continue monitoring throughout. This sequence is operationally different from the risk sequence and requires the substrate to support it — particularly context establishment that carries positional information, and the conjunction's continuous observation that surfaces tensions as patterns rather than as isolated complaints. PDCA+ provides this substrate, not for tension handling specifically, but as part of the framework's general structural choices. The capability to address tensions properly is a consequence of the substrate being in place, not a separate construction.

The piece's pedagogical hope is that readers who recognise their own organisations in the background story do not read it as critique. The risk-treatment-of-tensions move was made by competent people doing the best thing available within their apparatus. The available

apparatus has been one shape for a long time. The argument is not that the apparatus was misused; it is that another shape of apparatus is available, and the difference is large enough to be worth the work of acquiring it. Tensions remain difficult — they will not be solved by recognising them as tensions — but they become addressable in a way they are not when they are misclassified as risks. That difference, across all the tensions an organisation actually carries, compounds substantially over time.

THE STRUCTURAL RECOGNITION, IN ONE SENTENCE

Tensions are standing conditions, not events; they need to be monitored before they can be evaluated, evaluated before they can be treated, and continuously observed thereafter because they shift. The substrate that supports continuous observation, contextual depth, and directional response is what makes proper tension handling tractable. Without it, the best available response is general training, and general training is structurally wrong for tensions.