

Finding the Dialectic Tension

Which values are competing, and where the weighting should sit. Phase 3 of the method, run by hand, from "we keep arguing" to a named tension with a position inside it.

Dialectic and Deconstruction Solutions (DDS) is a sequence of questions. A person with a pen can run every one of them, and this sheet holds the Phase 3 questions in full. The engine at SolveSomething.com automates the questions. It does not own them.

What a dialectic is

A dialectic is two values that both protect something real. Freedom protects the right to move and to be wrong. Safety protects against one person's risk landing on someone else. Neither can be dropped, so the question is never which one wins. The question is how much of each, for this problem, for these people, and for how long. We call the two values the **poles** of a **tension**, and the share each pole currently gets the **weighting**.

A dichotomy is a tension that lost its context. When the argument becomes "enforce or do not enforce," "spend or save," "stay or go," the two values are still there, but the people have stopped saying what each one protects. Each side defends a pole it has not named, and nobody can move without losing.

Why naming it changes the argument

Once a tension is named, each side can hear its own value stated by the other side. The question shifts from who is right to where on the line between the two values we should stand, and who pays for standing there. That is a question people can work on together.

HOW TO USE THIS SHEET

Work the pages in order. Write a few words per line, not sentences: notes a careful person could read back a month later. Boxes are for our work, tinted cards are reference, the ochre panel is what a page is building toward. One worked example, the immigration blueprint from SolveSomething.com, runs through every page in the serif panels.

THE ROUTE THROUGH PHASE 3

Pages 4 and 5 find the tension under the argument. Page 6 steelmans both poles. Page 7 traces the origin of the weighting and the cost of staying. Page 8 sets the weighting, now and target, and names who pays. Page 9 takes a position and checks the second tension. Page 10 reads the room.

THE ARGUMENT AS IT ARRIVES

Before any of that, the problem the way we would complain about it, with the sides and the frustration left in. Later pages clean it up. This is the raw material.

WORKED EXAMPLE: IMMIGRATION

AS IT ARRIVES

Every year the border is a crisis, every year we fund the crisis, and every year the backlog is longer. One side says enforce, the other says process people humanely, and the system behaves like a permanent emergency.

The seven tensions

A reference page. The same seven tensions organize nearly every public problem, and each one runs the same way in a hospital, a classroom, and a legislature.

Every blueprint published at SolveSomething.com runs Phase 3, where the core tension is named, the current weighting is estimated, a target is proposed, and the people who bear the cost of the shift are named. The examples below quote those blueprints. The weightings are the blueprints' own estimates, not measurements. A **blueprint** is one full run of the method on one problem.

01 · FREEDOM AND SAFETY

How much agency do we keep when our choices can create danger for someone else? Freedom protects movement, experimentation, and the right to be wrong. Safety protects against one person's risk landing on someone else.

In the blueprints: the second tension in the immigration blueprint, where it reads as movement and opportunity against order and trust. The universal guarantees framework carries it as a secondary tension, and the civic culture blueprint runs it under its older name, freedom and order.

02 · INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE

Me and us. The individual pole says society exists to serve the person. The collective pole says the person lives inside an ecosystem, and my choices land on people who are also trying to live here.

In the blueprints: the gun blueprint (individual liberty against collective safety), the adoption blueprint, and the divorce and relational education piece, where the current weighting was estimated at 75 percent individual and 25 percent collective, with a target of 45 and 55. A gun shop, a marriage, and a cafeteria line.

03 · EFFICIENCY AND HUMANITY

Where is friction waste, and where is friction the cost of dignity? Efficiency seeks speed, scale, and lower cost. Humanity introduces the one case that does not fit the form, and the slowness that lets it be heard.

In the blueprints: the core tension of the healthcare blueprint, both classroom blueprints, the parks redesign (70 percent efficiency now, target 45), and the piece on why we elect performers instead of stewards, where speed and visibility were estimated at 85 percent against 15 percent for stability and dignity, with a target of 50 and 50.

04 · TRANSPARENCY AND PRIVACY

What should be known, by whom, and for what purpose? Transparency exposes power to scrutiny. Privacy protects the interior where mistakes, intimacy, and trust can exist unobserved.

In the blueprints: the core of the masked enforcement piece, where privacy and urgency were estimated at 90 percent against 10 percent for transparency and legitimacy, with a target of 40 privacy and 60 transparency. Also the political advertising blueprint. Who gets to be seen, and who gets to see.

05 · JUSTICE AND MERCY

Does fairness require consistency, or responsiveness to context? Justice applies the rule evenly. Mercy attends to intent, history, and human limitation.

In the blueprints: secondary in the encampments blueprint, tertiary in the adoption blueprint (75 percent justice now, target 50), and primary wherever a uniform rule meets an unequal life, such as who is poor enough for a free school lunch.

The seven tensions, continued

Two more from the library, how to read the weightings quoted here, and a place to build a tension the library does not hold.

06 · INNOVATION AND TRADITION

What should change, and what should survive? Innovation corrects the blind spots tradition cannot see. Tradition holds the accumulated structures that kept people alive.

In the blueprints: the elk restoration blueprint, where human land-use continuity was estimated at 70 percent against 30 percent for migration-habitat continuity, and the cultural burning blueprint, where the oldest knowledge on the land is the innovation.

07 · URGENCY AND SUSTAINABILITY

How do we respond to suffering now without reproducing the conditions that create more of it later? Urgency answers the people hurting today. Sustainability addresses the conditions so the suffering does not recur.

In the blueprints: the immigration blueprint (80 percent urgency against 20 percent sustainability now, target 45 and 55), the encampments piece (80 percent order response against 20 percent stabilization, target 45 and 55), the Steamboat workforce housing model, and the sewer spills piece. Stop the bleeding against keep the body alive.

HOW TO READ A WEIGHTING

80 percent urgency and 20 percent sustainability means that, as the blueprint read the system, four of every five decisions, dollars, and hours answered the urgent pole. A weighting describes the problem as it is actually run, not as anyone prefers it. The target is the blueprint's proposal, and the distance between the two numbers is the size of the shift being asked for. All of these are estimates made by a person reading the problem carefully, which is what page 5 asks us to do.

The library is a starting point, not a ceiling. When a problem contains a tension the seven do not capture, we build it, and name it as precisely as the seven are named. The gun blueprint did this with distrust of government against government as safety guarantor. The co-parenting blueprint did it with connection against self-protection.

A TENSION THE LIBRARY DOES NOT HOLD

If the argument we are working on runs between two values not on this list, name them here as two things worth protecting, each in a few words. Leave this blank if one of the seven fits.

Pole one protects _____

Pole two protects _____

WORKED EXAMPLE: IMMIGRATION

FROM THE LIBRARY

The blueprint's core tension is number seven, urgency and sustainability. Its second tension is number one, freedom and safety, read as movement and opportunity against order and trust. A third, efficiency and humanity, read as throughput against dignity, sits behind both. No problem-specific tension was needed.

Finding it: from the argument to the tension

Working backward. The argument names the sides. The tension is what each side is protecting, and it is usually something the side has never said out loud.

Each prompt below has a line for each side of the argument as it arrived on page one. Use the words the side would use about itself, not the words the other side uses about it. If a side would not recognize itself in what we wrote, we have described a caricature, and the tension is still hidden.

WHAT EACH SIDE SAYS IT IS PROTECTING

Side one says it is protecting _____

Side two says it is protecting _____

WHAT EACH SIDE WOULD LOSE IF IT LOST COMPLETELY

Imagine the other side gets everything it asked for. What is gone the next morning, concretely?

If side one lost completely, we would lose _____

If side two lost completely, we would lose _____

WHICH OF THE SEVEN DOES THAT MAP TO

Read the two losses against the seven tensions on pages 2 and 3. The loss is usually the pole. Write the tension's name and which side stands at which pole.

Is there a second tension underneath? Most real problems carry two or three tensions layered together. Ask what keeps the first tension stuck where it is. The answer is often a second tension, and it goes on page 9.

WORKED EXAMPLE: IMMIGRATION

SIDE ONE PROTECTS	The people arriving tonight, the facility that is already full, the officers working the surge, the town that has to house everyone this week.
SIDE TWO PROTECTS	Capacity that absorbs normal variation without declaring a crisis. Adjudication that runs like a utility, with the rules visible.
IF EACH LOST	Lose side one and the people in crisis today are told to wait for a twenty-year plan. Lose side two and every surge is met with temporary measures, so the capacity that would end the emergency is never built.
MAPS TO	Urgency and sustainability. Underneath it, freedom and safety: each surge is read as a threat to order, which keeps emergency the only frame anyone can fund.

Finding it: where the weighting sits

One dial per tension. Mark the dots for the tension we found, and for any second tension. Leave the rest blank.

Mark N where the weighting sits now and T where we think it should move. The left dot means the left pole gets everything, the right dot means the right pole gets everything, and the larger middle dot is an even split. Each step is roughly twelve points. A problem rarely sits at the ends, and the target rarely sits exactly in the middle. Estimate, do not measure. The weighting is a way of saying how far the shift has to travel, and in which direction.

Freedom	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Safety
Individual	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Collective
Efficiency	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Humanity
Transparency	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Privacy
Justice	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Mercy
Innovation	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Tradition
Urgency	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Sustainability
Our own, pole one	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Pole two

THE CORE TENSION

The one tension that, if it moved, would move the problem. Name it, and say in a few words why this one and not the others we marked. This is the tension the rest of the sheet works on.

Core tension: _____ Second tension: _____

Blueprint mode or analysis mode. When the problem is concrete, with named stakeholders and real resources, the weighting can be stated as a rough proportion and this sheet runs as written. When the problem is abstract (an ethical, philosophical, or cultural question), percentages produce false precision. Mark the dials for direction only and carry the rest of the sheet in sentences.

WORKED EXAMPLE: IMMIGRATION

ON THE DIALS

Urgency and sustainability: N on the second dot from urgency (the blueprint estimates 80 percent urgency), T on the dot one step past the middle (target 45 percent urgency, 55 sustainability).
Freedom and safety: N two dots toward safety, T one dot toward safety. Concrete problem with named agencies and budgets, so blueprint mode.

CORE, AND WHY

Urgency and sustainability. The safety weighting is real, but it is held in place by the emergency frame. Move the emergency frame and the safety pole can be honored through capacity instead of through surge.

Steelmanning both poles

Before any analysis. A steelman is the strongest honest version of a position, written so its own advocate would sign it. Fill both columns before turning the page.

This is the page most people want to skip, because one of the two poles is usually ours and the other is usually theirs. The method does not run until both are written as something worth protecting. A pole we cannot steelman is a pole we have not understood, and a solution built on that will be heard as an attack before it is heard as a plan.

POLE ONE

Named: _____

What this pole protects. The real need, stated the way its advocate would state it.

What collapses without it. If this value were dropped entirely, what breaks first, for whom?

POLE TWO

Named: _____

What this pole protects. The real need, stated the way its advocate would state it.

What collapses without it. If this value were dropped entirely, what breaks first, for whom?

The threshold rule: a tension is not named until both poles are written as worth protecting. Until then we have a side and an obstacle, which is a dichotomy, and the rest of this sheet will not hold.

THE OPPOSITION TEST

Read each column as if we were its most principled advocate. Check each line only when it is true of both columns.

- ☐ An advocate for this pole would recognize their position in what we wrote.
- ☐ The description names a structural need (what it keeps working), not a moral failure (greed, fear, ignorance).
- ☐ The collapse we described is concrete: a person, a place, a process that stops.
- ☐ We could read the column aloud in a room full of that pole's advocates without wincing.

WORKED EXAMPLE: IMMIGRATION

URGENCY PROTECTS

The person who crossed last night and is sleeping on a floor. The agency whose facility is at capacity. The border town whose services are absorbing a surge it did not plan for. Without it, suffering that is happening now is deferred to a plan that is years out, and the deferral itself becomes a reason for distrust.

SUSTAINABILITY PROTECTS

The processing capacity that would make the next surge an ordinary month: adjudicators, intake, placement, funded as a standing line. Without it, every surge is answered with temporary measures, the backlog grows through each one, and the system never acquires the ability to end the emergency it keeps declaring.

The origin of the weighting, and the cost of staying

Why the dial sits where it sits, and who is paying for that today. Both in concrete terms.

The weighting did not arrive by accident. Something installed it: a specific event, an incentive that rewards one pole, or a mechanism that makes one pole easier to fund, see, or defend. "Culture" is not an answer here. Neither is "politics." The origin should be precise enough to name the year, the rule, the budget line, or the fear.

THE ORIGIN OF THE CURRENT WEIGHTING

The event, incentive, or mechanism that drove the imbalance toward _____

What keeps it there now. The origin may be old. What renews the imbalance each year?

ORIGIN QUALITY TEST

- ☐ We named a specific driver (a rule, a funding structure, an event, a fear with a date), not a mood or a culture.
- ☐ The driver explains the direction of the imbalance, not only that one exists.
- ☐ The driver could be wrong. Someone could check it.

THE COST OF STAYING

Who is suffering now. Names of groups, not abstractions. Where are they, and what does a bad week look like for them?

What is breaking down. The process, relationship, or capacity that the current weighting is eroding.

WORKED EXAMPLE: IMMIGRATION

ORIGIN	An emergency can be funded in a week and a permanent staffing line cannot. Each surge is paid for as a crisis, the money arrives as temporary measures, and when the surge ebbs the temporary capacity is cut. A crisis is visible and fundable. Steady capacity is neither.
WHAT KEEPS IT THERE	Every cycle leaves the backlog longer, so the next surge is larger, so the next emergency is easier to declare. The frame renews itself.
WHO IS SUFFERING	People waiting years in the backlog with no answer. Border communities absorbing each surge with no standing support. Officers and adjudicators working in a permanent surge. A public that has watched the same emergency declared for decades and concluded that nothing works.

The weighting and the shift

Current state and target state, then the ledger: who benefits, who bears the cost, what is sacrificed, and what the target looks like in practice.

THE WEIGHTING

Current state: _____ percent _____ and _____ percent _____

Target state: _____ percent and _____ percent. Distance the shift travels: _____ points.

Who benefits (the specific group that experiences relief): _____

Who bears cost (the specific group that experiences loss), and why that weight belongs on those shoulders:

What is sacrificed (what we give up, concretely): _____

What emotional burden moves, and from whom to whom:

WHAT THE TARGET MEANS IN PRACTICE

The behaviors, conditions, or policies that change when the dial moves. If nothing here would be visible to someone standing in the problem, the target is a wish.

MINIMUM DIALECTICS THRESHOLD: PHASE 3 IS INCOMPLETE UNTIL ALL THREE ARE ON THE PAGE

- ☐ One genuine loss group is named.
- ☐ One concrete sacrifice is named.
- ☐ One redistributed emotional burden is named.

WORKED EXAMPLE: IMMIGRATION

WEIGHTING	Current: 80 percent urgency, 20 sustainability. Target: 45 urgency, 55 sustainability.
WHO BENEFITS	People in the queue, who get an answer on a known timeline. Border communities, who get standing support instead of a surge.
WHO BEARS COST	Taxpayers, who fund capacity that looks idle in a quiet year. People in crisis today, who still wait while it is built. Worth it because the alternative is a backlog that grows through every surge.
SACRIFICED	The visible emergency response as the main instrument, and the claim that the next crisis will be the last.
BURDEN MOVES	From the people in the queue and the officers at the surge to the budget writers who must defend standing capacity in a quiet year.
IN PRACTICE	Fast sorting at intake. Adjudication scaled like a utility. Local impact compacts with the towns that absorb arrivals. Capacity on a standing budget line, not a supplemental.

What this holds, and the intersection

The position inside the tension, in one or two sentences. Then the second tension, and how the two act on each other.

A position is not a resolution. Both poles stay alive. But it is also not a suspension. "Both are real" is where the work starts, not where it ends. When a situation requires a choice, perpetual balancing is its own failure, and non-commitment dressed as sophistication is not dialectical maturity. The position says how much of each pole, for whom, and for how long, and it can be disagreed with. That is what makes it a position.

WHAT THIS HOLDS

Where we stand inside the tension, with both poles still protected. One or two precise sentences.

- ☐ Someone could disagree with this. It is not a restatement of "both matter."
- ☐ It names which pole carries more weight for this problem, and what the other pole keeps.

Splitting the difference is not a position. Neither is picking a winner. Fifty and fifty is a legitimate target only when the problem actually calls for it, as the performers and stewards piece argued, and it has to be argued, not defaulted to.

THE SECOND TENSION

If a second tension is active (page 5), name it and give it the short version of pages 6 to 8: what each pole protects, where the weighting sits, and where it should move.

Second tension: _____ Now: _____ Target: _____

THE INTERSECTION

How the two tensions amplify, complicate, or reframe each other. Does the second one hold the first in place? Does moving the first release the second, or tighten it? What does one solution have to do for both?

WORKED EXAMPLE: IMMIGRATION

WHAT THIS HOLDS	Sustainability carries the larger share, because a system run as a permanent emergency never builds the capacity that would end it. Urgency keeps the first ninety days: the backlog named, near-term relief built in, nobody in crisis today asked to wait for the twenty-year plan.
SECOND TENSION	Freedom and safety, as movement and opportunity against order and trust. Weighted toward safety now. Target: a step toward movement, with the rules visible.
INTERSECTION	The safety pole holds the urgency weighting in place. Each surge is read as a threat to order, which makes emergency the only fundable frame, and emergency processing hides the rules, which erodes trust, which raises the safety weighting again. Capacity with visible rules serves both: order gets a system that runs, movement gets a queue that moves.

The room

Where the people who have to accept this sit on the same dials. A solution that lands on the wrong side of the room's weighting is heard as an attack before it is heard as a plan.

Every room carries a weighting. The people who will decide, fund, or live with this arrived already weighted, by a history, a profession, a loss, a town. Most rooms are a mix, so mark the two or three factions separately, using each faction's letter.

THE ROOM ON THE CORE TENSION

Faction A: _____ Faction B: _____ Faction C: _____

Pole one ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Pole two

Second tension, same factions:

Pole one ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Pole two

FACTION	WHAT IT IS PROTECTING	WHAT A SOLUTION MUST KEEP FOR IT
A	_____	_____
B	_____	_____
C	_____	_____

THREE THINGS THE ROOM'S WEIGHTING TELLS A DESIGNER

Distance. A target more than about twenty points from where the room sits needs a sequence, with the first step inside the room's current weighting.

Protection. Whatever the room cannot give up gets kept, and the solution says so in its first paragraph.

Backlash. The faction weighted toward the pole we move away from carries the loss. If the loss arrives as humiliation rather than as a named cost, it organizes against the solution and wins.

THE FIRST STEP THE ROOM CAN HEAR

The one move that lands inside the room's weighting and still points at the target.

WORKED EXAMPLE: IMMIGRATION	
THE ROOM	The agencies, the legislatures, and the public that funds them sit at about 80 percent urgency. Walk in with steady-state capacity, which is the right answer, and the room hears someone saying the emergency is not real.
FACTIONS	Enforcement agencies and border towns protect order and relief this week. Advocates and the people in the queue protect dignity and an answer. Budget writers protect against open-ended cost.
FIRST STEP	The distance is 35 points, so a sequence. Name the backlog first, build the ninety-day relief as the first unit of standing capacity, with a visible cap, so each faction sees what it keeps.