

Stakeholder Tension Grid

A worksheet for mapping the relationships between stakeholders in a complex situation, with a focus on the tensions between them rather than the formal organisation chart.

1. List the stakeholders

List every stakeholder relevant to the situation. Three to seven is the useful range. Fewer than three usually means the situation is not a stakeholder problem; more than seven means the grid will be unreadable and the work needs to be split into two grids.

For each stakeholder, capture:

- A short label (initials or role).
- Their role in the situation.
- Their formal seniority on a three-point scale: junior, peer, senior. *Peer* and *senior* are relative to whoever is filling in the grid.

Label	Role	Seniority

2. Pairwise relationships

For each pair of stakeholders, characterise the relationship on three dimensions. Use the following short codes in the cells:

- **Trust:** + (high), o (neutral), - (low), ? (unknown to you).
- **Alignment:** whether their positions on the current situation point in the same direction. = (aligned), ~ (partially aligned), != (opposed), ? (unknown).
- **Frequency:** how often they actually interact. H (frequently), M (occasionally), L (rarely).

The grid is symmetrical, so fill in only the upper or lower triangle.

	A	B	C	D	E
A	—				
B	—	—			
C	—	—	—		
D	—	—	—	—	
E	—	—	—	—	—

Format each cell as Trust / Alignment / Frequency. Example: + / = / M means high trust, aligned position, occasional interaction.

The cells with ? are the ones to pay attention to. They mark the relationships you are guessing about, and your guesses are usually less reliable than you think.

3. Asymmetric perceptions

Most relationships are not symmetric in how the parties perceive them. For each pair where you suspect asymmetry, write a sentence on each side.

Example: - A trusts B more than B trusts A. A treats B as a peer; B treats A as a stakeholder to manage.

Pair	Asymmetry

Asymmetric relationships are where unilateral interventions misfire most often. If A proposes a candid conversation with B based on A's perception of high trust, and B's perception is lower, the conversation lands differently than A expected.

4. Coalitions and triangles

Two patterns are worth marking explicitly.

Coalitions: groups of three or more stakeholders whose alignment is high enough that they tend to move together on contested questions. Coalitions are not necessarily a problem; they become one when their existence is denied.

Coalition members	What they tend to align on

Triangles: three-party patterns where two parties communicate primarily through a third rather than directly. Triangles are stable but expensive; they place a load on the third party that often becomes unsustainable.

The two parties	The third party they route through	What they are avoiding by not communicating directly

Triangles in your situation are usually the most consequential pattern on the grid. The third party is often the person filling in the worksheet.

5. The standing map

For the situation you are working on, mark each stakeholder against two questions:

1. Do they have authority to act on this?
2. Do they have the relationship with the other parties to be heard if they did?

Stakeholder	Authority	Relationship	Notes

A stakeholder with authority and relationship is usually the right person to lead the intervention. A stakeholder with authority but no relationship will produce compliance without commitment. A stakeholder with relationship but no authority can convene the conversation but cannot decide it. A stakeholder with neither cannot act here, regardless of how much they care about the outcome.

The honest answer about the person filling in the worksheet often appears in the last row.

6. What this grid shows you

Write three to five sentences summarising what the grid reveals that you did not see clearly before. The discipline matters: if you cannot summarise what the grid shows, the grid has not yet earned its place in your thinking and probably needs a second pass.

(write here)

7. What the grid is missing

The grid is a snapshot. Three things it does not capture:

- **History.** Past conflicts that shape current trust.
- **Direction.** Whether relationships are stable, improving, or deteriorating.
- **Off-grid influence.** People who do not appear on the grid but affect how the parties behave.

Note the most consequential omissions in your case.

(write here)

How to use this worksheet

- Use it after the conflict map, not before. The grid is a sharpening tool, not a discovery tool.
- Update it. Relationships change; coalitions shift; new triangles form. A grid more than three months old is usually wrong in places.
- Do not show it to the people on it. The frankness required to fill it in usefully is incompatible with sharing.

For an example of the grid completed against a real scenario, see [examples/stakeholder-tension-grid-filled.md](#).